



“Paul Defends His Character” – John Hattenberger
2 Corinthians 1:12 – 2:4
May 30, 2021

12 For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience, that we behaved in the world with simplicity and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God, and supremely so toward you. 13 For we are not writing to you anything other than what you read and understand and I hope you will fully understand— 14 just as you did partially understand us—that on the day of our Lord Jesus you will boast of us as we will boast of you.

15 Because I was sure of this, I wanted to come to you first, so that you might have a second experience of grace. 16 I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia, and to come back to you from Macedonia and have you send me on my way to Judea. 17 Was I vacillating when I wanted to do this? Do I make my plans according to the flesh, ready to say “Yes, yes” and “No, no” at the same time? 18 As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been Yes and No. 19 For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not Yes and No, but in him it is always Yes. 20 For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory. 21 And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, 22 and who has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee. 23 But I call God to witness against me—it was to spare you that I refrained from coming again to Corinth. 24 Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, for you stand firm in your faith.

2 For I made up my mind not to make another painful visit to you. 2 For if I cause you pain, who is there to make me glad but the one whom I have pained? 3 And I wrote as I did, so that when I came I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice, for I felt sure of all of you, that my joy would be the joy of you all. 4 For I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you.

We are continuing our study of 2nd Corinthians. Last week, David kicked it off and did an excellent job covering the first 11 verses:

- Christians who follow hard after Jesus will suffer from oppression.
- When we are burdened and in despair,
- God is our comforter.
- God will deliver.

Today, we'll continue in Chapter 1. But first I want to look at the context. David covered context last week. But I want to do it again, because we need to understand the context to make sense of this section of Paul's letter. As Paul was writing 2nd Corinthians to the church in Corinth, his relationship with the church was, as David said last week, "complicated."

Yes, Paul had led many Corinthians to saving faith in Jesus. Yes, Paul had founded the church in Corinth. Yes, Paul had served in the church for 18 months preaching, saving, baptizing, and organizing the church. But that was 6 or 7 years ago. Several things had happened since then:

- Paul wrote a letter (1st letter) to the church to correct their attitude about sexual sins. That letter is lost. It's not part of the bible.
- Paul got news there were problems in the Corinthian church.
- Paul wrote them a 2nd letter (called "1st Corinthians") to correct some sinful behaviors, and respond to a number of questions they had.
- Paul traveled to Corinth to see them. Paul called it a "painful visit". It went badly for both Paul and the Corinthian church. A man in the church (don't know who) slandered Paul's character and publicly humiliated him. Worst of all: the church failed to stand up and defend Paul. Paul left Corinth and went to Ephesus.
- Paul wrote them a 3rd letter (which is also lost, not part of the Bible). Many theologians call it the "severe letter". He told the church to discipline the man who had slandered and humiliated Paul, and repent for not defending Paul. That letter caused the church a lot of grief.
- Not long after that, Paul wrote 2nd Corinthians, his 4th letter, which we're studying now.

So at the time when he wrote 2 Corinthians, Paul's relationship with the Corinthian Christians was messy. Filled with conflict, hard feelings, and pain.

Open your Bibles to 2nd Corinthians 1:12 through 2:4. We'll divide it into 4 parts, in which Paul:

1. Reviewed his behavior.
2. Explained his travel plans.
3. Defended his character.
4. Confirmed his love.

Part 1: Paul reviewed his behavior.

Paul was a man of strong godly character. Earlier in our Bible reading, we read 1 Timothy 3 and Psalm 15 we saw several godly character traits. Paul discussed his character by reminding the Corinthians how he had behaved in his interactions with them. Note: Paul says “we” and “our” because he’s including Timothy in this.

2 Corinthians 1:12 - 14: For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience, that we behaved in the world with simplicity and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God, and supremely so toward you. 13 For we are not writing to you anything other than what you read and understand and I hope you will fully understand— 14 just as you did partially understand us—that on the day of our Lord Jesus you will boast of us as we will boast of you.

Like a lawyer in a trial, Paul called on “our conscience” that is, Paul’s and Timothy’s consciences to give a testimony about how they behaved with the Corinthian Christians. Our conscience is our moral compass. It tells us what is right and what is wrong. On any moral issue, we can have either a clear conscience, which will declare us innocent, or a guilty conscience, which will condemn or accuse us. Regarding Paul and Timothy’s behavior in the Corinthian church, their conscience was clear: they were innocent. Their conscience did not condemn or accuse them.

Paul described how they behaved in interactions with them. They behaved: With simplicity, meaning they kept things simple, straightforward. Not clever or complicated or confusing.

With Godly sincerity: They were genuine, honest, with no falsehood or deceit. Not by earthly wisdom: which is “foolishness” (1 Corinthians 3:19), but By the grace of God: All they accomplished was by God’s grace: a gift. They were totally dependent on God for wisdom, strength, success.

They wrote letters that the Corinthians could read and understand. They were clear and straightforward, only the truth, with no deception or manipulation.

Finally, Paul said he wanted them to fully understand that when Jesus comes back and Christians stand before Jesus to give an account of their lives, Paul would boast about the Corinthian believers, and Paul hoped the Corinthians would boast about Paul and Timothy.

Part 2: Paul explained his travel plans.

Why? Because the man in the church who slandered Paul's character said Paul was untrustworthy and unreliable. What I call "flaky". Why? Because Paul made travel plans and didn't keep them. Basically, he said: "Paul is not trustworthy. He's flaky. He promised to come to Corinth, but he didn't show up. If you can't trust him to keep his travel plans, why should you believe his gospel message?"

Frankly, this criticism is a cheap shot. I have travelled the world extensively in the last 40 years. I have flown over 2.6 million miles. That's 104 times around the world. I have changed my travel plans hundreds of times. No one called me untrustworthy, unreliable or flaky. Paul did the same thing: He changed his travel plans. What travel plans? He made plans to travel to Corinth and visit the church. We see this in 1st Corinthians:

1 Corinthians 16:5-7: "I will visit you after passing through Macedonia, for I intend to pass through Macedonia, and perhaps I will stay with you or even spend the winter, so that you may help me on my journey, wherever I go. For I do not want to see you now just in passing. I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits."

That was Plan A: From Ephesus he wanted to go to Macedonia first, then south to Corinth, and stay for a while, maybe even all winter. Did Paul complete Travel Plan A? No. He changed his plan in his 2nd Corinthians letter.

2 Corinthians 1:15-16: "15 Because I was sure of this [sure of what? Sure that we could boast about you, and sure that you could boast about us], I wanted to come to you first, so that you might have a second experience of grace. 16 I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia, and to come back to you from Macedonia and have you send me on my way to Judea."

This was Plan B: From Ephesus, he wanted to go to Corinth first, then north into Macedonia, and then south back to Corinth – a 2nd time -- and then on to Judea. Why did Paul change to Plan B? So he could visit them twice: "a second experience of grace". Did Paul complete Travel Plan B?

Well... he started, but didn't finish. He went to Corinth. But... That visit was the "painful visit" that went so badly. Paul's character was slandered. He was humiliated in public. And the church didn't stand up to defend him. What did Paul do? He left Corinth and went straight back to Ephesus.

Part 3: Paul defended his character.

To defend his character, Paul started by asking 2 rhetorical questions:

“2 Corinthians 1:17: Was I vacillating [i.e., indecisive, fickle, flaky] when I wanted to do this [i.e., visit you]? [No] Do I make my plans according to the flesh [i.e., in a worldly manner], ready to say “Yes, yes” and “No, no” at the same time? [No] “

Paul said: When I say I’m going to do something, I just say “Yes, I will”. I don’t say “Yes” and “No” at the same time. Then Paul said he acted the same way in his preaching.

2 Corinthians 1:18-22: “18 As surely as God is faithful, our word to you [i.e., our preaching of the gospel to you] has not been Yes and No. 19 For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus [AKA Silas] and Timothy and I, was not Yes and No, but in him it is always Yes. 20 For all the promises of God find their Yes in him [Jesus]. That is why it is through him [Jesus] that we utter our Amen to God for his glory. 21 And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, 22 and who has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee.”

What was Paul saying? “We told you the good news of the Gospel. We didn’t waver. We weren’t flaky. We didn’t say “Yes, you’ll be saved”, and “No, you won’t be saved.” We didn’t say “Uh, maybe yes, maybe no”. With Jesus, it’s always “Yes!” All of God’s promises come true in Jesus. It is always “Yes”! That’s why we say “Amen!” God himself established us, anointed us, and put the Holy Spirit in our hearts as a seal and guarantee that we are saved. Bottom line: “YES! The gospel message is true. It is sealed and guaranteed by God. Trust me on this. I am trustworthy. I am not flaky.”

Then Paul anticipated and answered a question: “Why didn’t you come back to Corinth a second time like you planned?” So, Paul told them why:

2 Corinthians 1:23-24: “23 But I call God to witness against me—it was to spare you that I refrained from coming again to Corinth. 24 Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, for you stand firm in your faith.”

Paul, like a lawyer in a trial, called God as a witness that what he was about to say was true. Paul said: “I didn’t come back to Corinth a 2nd time in order to spare you.” Spare them? Spare them from what? Good question. We need to do some Sherlock Holmes detective work. We have 4 clues:

Clue 1: Verse 24: “Not that we lord it over your faith...” “Lord it over” means to exercise authority in a powerful manner.

Clue 2: In his previous letter – 1st Corinthians -- Paul exercised his authority by scolding them. For what? For tolerating arrogance and rebellion in the church.

1 Corinthians 4:21: What do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod [i.e., do you want a spanking?], or with love in a spirit of gentleness?

Clue 3: At the end of this letter: 2 Corinthians 13:2. Paul said he had warned them (he didn’t scold them) when he was in Corinth – on that “painful visit” – that if he came back to Corinth, he wasn’t going to “spare them”... the same phrase.

2 Corinthians 13:2: I warned those who sinned... when I was present on my second visit [i.e., Paul’s painful visit], that if I come again I will not spare them.

Clue 4: 8 verses later in 13:10:

2 Corinthians 13:10: ... I write these things [i.e., this 2 Corinth letter] while I am away from you ... [so] that when I come I may not have to be severe [or harsh] in my use of the authority that the Lord has given me...

All 4 of these verses talk about Paul’s authority. Did Paul have authority over the church in Corinth? Absolutely, yes. He was an apostle. He led many Corinthians to faith in Jesus. He formed the church there. He sent Apollos, Titus, Timothy to Corinth with instructions. The reason why Paul didn’t go back to Corinth was in order to spare them. From what? From Paul exercising his authority over them in a severe way. Like giving them a spanking. Why might Paul spank them? For the way the church treated Paul during his “painful visit” to Corinth. When this man slandered Paul’s character and publicly humiliated him, the Corinthians did not stand up for Paul or defend him. Bottom line: Paul didn’t go back to Corinth as he had planned in order to spare them from Paul using his authority and rebuking them harshly for their terrible behavior. But... Paul had a second reason why he didn’t go back to Corinth:

2 Corinthians 2:1-2: “For I made up my mind not to make another painful visit to you. 2 For if I cause you pain, who is there to make me glad but the one whom I have pained?”

Both Paul and the church suffered during his “painful visit”. Paul didn’t want either of them to suffer that pain again. Paul said: “I didn’t want to bring you more pain by visiting Corinth again. If I cause you more pain, who is going to make me happy? Your joy is my joy. If I ruin your joy, I’ll ruin my own joy too.”

Part 4: Paul confirmed his love for the Corinthian Christians

Paul didn’t go back to Corinth. What did he do instead? Paul wrote them a letter. The letter theologians call the “severe letter” The letter Paul wrote to them after his “painful visit”. Now, we don’t have that letter. It’s not Scripture. We don’t know exactly what it said. But studying the rest of 2nd Corinthians, and reading between the lines, we conclude that Paul told them to discipline the man who had slandered and humiliated Paul, and repent for failing to support and defend Paul. But look how Paul describes that letter.

2 Corinthians 2:3-4: 3 And I wrote as I did [referring to the “severe letter”], so that when I came I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice, for I felt sure of all of you, that my joy would be the joy of you all. 4 For I wrote [that “severe letter”] to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you.

Paul said: “When I got back to Ephesus, I wrote you a letter. I wanted you to repent, so that next time I come to see you there wouldn’t be pain, but joy. When I wrote that letter, I was hurt, I was sad, I was in tears. My intention in writing that letter was not to cause you pain. Rather, I wanted to let you know “the abundant love I have for you.”

Now... here we have a bit of a puzzle.

Theologians call this letter a “severe letter”. Why “severe”? Because it was a letter of exhortation calling them to repentance and action; and the letter caused the Corinthian Christians “grief”. Paul wrote: “...I see that that letter grieved you...” in 2 Corinthians 7:8. So, theologians call it the “severe letter”.

On the other hand, Paul says it was a love letter! I wrote to say “I love you”. Verse 4: “I wrote to you ... to let you know the abundant love that I have for you.” The puzzle: How can Paul consider this “severe letter” to be a “love letter”?

Because the word “love” is AGAPE, which is NOT the sappy, smiling, giggling emotional feeling of affection that we see in Hallmark greeting cards. AGAPE love is an unselfish action taken by one person (in this case Paul), even if he doesn’t feel like it, that is done for the good of others (in this case the Corinthian Christians), even if they don’t deserve it.

In his “severe letter”, Paul spoke the truth in love. He spoke the truth in love about their sinfulness, and exhorted them to repent and take action. This was for the good of the Corinthian church, that they might grow in maturity and Christ-likeness, even though the letter grieved them. Thus, the letter could properly be called a “severe love letter”.

So that’s it for today.

1. Paul reviewed his behavior.
2. Paul explained his travel plans.
3. Paul defended his character.
4. Paul confirmed his love.

But, that’s not the end of the story. Throughout the rest of 2nd Corinthians, Paul refers back to these events several times, so you’ll be hearing more about this as we study the letter together. Also, regarding Paul’s travel plans, I am happy to say that about 9 months after writing 2nd Corinthians, Paul went through Macedonia, and then to Corinth. He stayed in Corinth for 3 months. As you recall, that was Paul’s original travel plan, which I called Plan A. So, Paul wasn’t flaky about his travel plans after all.

Big picture: that’s a rocky, troublesome, roller-coaster story. It’s a sad story. Paul, the man who led them to Jesus and founded the church, got slandered. His relationship with the church got damaged. Paul got hurt and suffered pain. The church got hurt and suffered pain. All because of foolish and sinful actions, which triggered several sad, divisive, troublesome events in the church.

Now, I know what some of you are thinking. “Uh oh. He’s going to compare this to recent events at Tomball Bible Church.” Nope. Not going there. But I am going to talk about what applications there are for us to learn from Paul’s experience.

There are many applications here. I will cover 5.

1. Confront face to face, in private.

The man in the Corinthian church had a problem with Paul. He wanted to confront Paul. Nothing wrong with that. But he handled it in a very sinful manner. He humiliated Paul in a public setting, without ever talking to Paul directly. If Facebook had been around then, he probably would have used what I call the “toxic post method” of slander.

The biblical approach is to speak the truth in love, directly to the individual involved, not to others, face to face, gently, in private.

2. Humbly consider when someone questions your character.

Godly character is important. If someone questions your character, listen with humility and take a hard look at yourself. Ask: “Is my conscience clear?” They may be telling you the truth about your character.

Proverbs 12:1: Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but he who hates reproof is stupid.

Don't be stupid. Be humble.

3. Defend your character for the right reasons.

Paul needed to defend his character. Not because Paul was proud or angry or hurt. Paul strongly defended his character because the slander was hurting others. Namely: young Christians, and unbelievers. The slander of Paul's character was causing them both to question the truth about the gospel message.

However, there are times when we should not defend ourselves. The bible encourages us to overlook an offense.

Proverbs 19:11: Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense.

4.Honor, respect and defend your leaders.

Leading in a church is a difficult task. It was difficult in Paul's day. It's difficult today. One man slandered Paul and many in the church abandoned him. The Bible is clear that we should honor, respect and defend our church leaders.

1 Timothy 5:19: Do not admit [or receive or entertain] a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses.

1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 (NIV): Now we ask you, brothers, to respect [or appreciate] those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord.... 13 Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work.

5.Forgive and reconcile with others.

Although Paul suffered badly from the slander and abandonment, he forgave and reconciled with the believers in Corinth. We must do so also. Jesus considered that reconciliation with others is an essential requirement for worship.

Matthew 5:23-24: So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

Five applications:

- 1.Confront face to face, in private
- 2.Humbly consider when someone questions your character
- 3.Defend your character for the right reasons
- 4.Honor, respect and defend your leaders
- 5.Forgive and reconcile with others.

**That's a lot of applications. My suggestion to each of us:
Just pick one and do it.**