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Paul’s Painful Visit

1:23 to 2:4

Paul’s painful visit DIG: What caused Paul to change his travel plans? What was “the severe letter?” Why did Paul write it? What evidence of Paul’s compassion and love do you see here? What type of leadership did Paul display? What was Paul’s basic reaction to the most severe troubles that beset him? What is “the glue” that holds a congregation together?

REFLECT: What ministry team are you a part of? Think of the last time you felt discouraged in your ministry? What led to that season of discouragement? What can you take from Paul’s account to help you better handle discouragement the next time it comes? Is your desire for unity greater than your desire for holiness and purity? Do you think team? Why? Why not?

When we keep our eyes on Yeshua we can accomplish everything that ADONAI has for us.

Because of the arrival of **false apostles** who claimed apostolic authority (**to see link click [Af](#) - The Problem of the False Apostles**) from Judea, **Paul** ended up making a second brief, unscheduled visit directly across the Aegean Sea from Ephesus to **Corinth** in 55 AD, but one that was unsuccessful in reducing the level of opposition against **him**, especially from one **particular individual (2:1 and 13:2)**. During this visit **Paul** was personally attacked (**2:5 and 7:12**). It was a **painful visit** for both **Paul** and **his** spiritual children in **Corinth**. But **Paul** was still hopeful that **he** could communicate in such a way that would finalize a reconciliation between **him** and the church that **he** founded.⁵⁹

Stating the purity of **his** motives, **Paul** declared: **I call upon God as my witness (1:23a)**. First, in **Paul’s** eyes **ADONAI, the Supreme Judge** of all, who knows all the nooks-and-crannies of a person’s heart, whose discerning **Spirit** probes all motives and sorts out all intentions, was **his** ultimate, incomparable as a **witness** – a **witness** who puts to rest the need for any other. Second, the phrase translated

as my witness could more literally be rendered *about my life*, or even *against my life*, suggesting that **Paul** was submitting **himself** before **God** as **Judge**, and therefore, going so far as to be putting **his** own life on the line if **he** was lying.⁶⁰

To call upon (Greek: *epikaloumai*) is a common legal term in the TaNaKh for summoning witnesses to a trial – equivalent to our subpoena today. Under Jewish law any matter had to be verified by **two or three witnesses (Deuteronomy 19:15)**. Since there were no human witnesses who could testify about the intentions of **his** heart, **Paul** called on **God** as **his** sole witness to testify to the fact that it was to *spare the Corinthians* that **he** did not pay **them** a return visit. It was the heart of a shepherd, not indecisiveness, that caused **him** to change **his** travel plans.⁶¹

Paul declared: **God knows what my life is like - that the reason I held back from coming to Corinth was out of consideration for you (1:23b)!** Despite the dark thoughts that some of **the Corinthians** held against **him**, **Paul** mercifully wanted to give **them** time to correct the problems **he** wrote of in **First Corinthians**. Also, some in **Corinth** were guilty of being led into mutiny, which prompted “the severe letter” of **2:4**. **He** wanted to give those who had been led astray by **the false apostles** time to repent. **The apostle** was also hoping for a good report from **Titus** about **the Corinthians’** repenting and rejecting **the false apostles** in favor of **him** before visiting **them**. Much to **his** relief, after a time, that report was a positive one (see **BI - The Effects of the Severe Letter**).⁶²

Ever sensitive to avoid provoking unnecessary conflict, **Paul** quickly added a very positive disclaimer. **We are not trying to dictate how you must live out your trust in the Messiah (1:24a)**. **The apostle** was obligated to serve **his converts**, not to dominate **them**. **Peter** would later write to all those in leadership: **Shepherd the flock of God that is in your care, exercising oversight not out of constraint, but willingly, as God wants; and not out of a desire for dishonest gain, but with enthusiasm, also not as doers domineering over those in your care, but as people who become examples to the flock (First Peter 5:2-3)**. **Paul** never abused **his** apostolic authority to gain prestige, power, or to further **his** own selfish aims. It was **his** privilege to work with **them**. And **his** goal, even in disciplining some of **the unruly Corinthians**, was the **joy** that **their** obedience to **the Lord** would bring to **them**.

Paul was confident that **in their trust (their salvation) the Corinthians were standing firm (1:24b)**. It was true that **they** had come to **faith** through **Paul’s**

ministry, but **their belief** in **Yeshua** was **their own**, and rested on the power of **God (First Corinthians 2:5; 15:1-11)**. As a result, **their belief** in **Yeshua** was a private matter between **them** and **God (Romans 5:1-2, 11:20)**, and in this respect, **they** were subject to no one else (**Romans 14:4**).⁶³ And obviously, this has also been true down through the ages and is true for us today.

Continuing this thought, **Paul** reasoned: **Rather, we are working with you for your own joy (1:24c)**. Looking back on **his** ministry in **Corinth**, **Paul** reminded **them** of what **he** had said earlier: **We are God’s co-workers with you (First Corinthians 3:9a)**. **The apostle** viewed the body of **Messiah** as a team, **working together**. Thus, **Paul’s apostolic “team”** sought the **joy** of the community, a **joy** that had been disturbed by the arrival of **the false apostles**, who had turned some away from **Paul**. Such **joy** is integral to the Good News that **they** preached because **it** came from **the Ruach Ha’Kodesh (Romans 14:17; Galatians 5:22; First Thessalonians 1:6)** and from **ADONAI (Romans 15:13)**. This is why **Paul** could say unashamedly that **his joy** was **their joy (2:3)**; for **he** was speaking not of a merely human emotion, but the **joy** that comes from **God’s Spirit**.⁶⁴



So I made up my mind that I would not pay you another painful visit (2:1). **He** was openly attacked (**2:5-8** and **10, 7:12**) and **the Corinthians** did not defend **him**. But by giving **the Corinthians** time to repent, **Paul** hoped to avoid another **painful encounter** with **them**. So **his** change in travel plans was not motivated by being double-minded or unreliable as **the false apostles** had evidently claimed, but by **Paul’s** sensitivity toward **his** beloved church.⁶⁵ **Paul’s** other proposed visit (**First Corinthians 16:1-8**) never came to pass. What seemingly changed **his** mind was the fact that the second visit was so **painful**, that **he** needed to be

certain that things had calmed down before **he** dared to come again – and it was left to **Titus** to bring the whole situation under control (**Second Corinthians 2:12-13, 7:5-7, 13b-16**).

Paul faced a dilemma. To come to **Corinth** might intensify the problem and the **pain**; however, to stay away would allow the problems to fester and make reconciliation more difficult. Not only that, to inflict **pain** on **the Corinthians** at that time would have effectively dried up the very source of **his** own **joy** – **the Corinthians themselves! If by merely showing up I would put you in an embarrassingly painful position, how would you then be free to encourage and refresh me (2:2 The Message)?** **Paul’s** solution to **his** dilemma was to write a **painfully** severe letter of rebuke. Unlike many in the Church today, **Paul** did not place church unity above truth and holiness. **He** was willing to confront unrepentant sin, even at the cost of **his** own **joy**. There could be no **joy** in **his** relationship with **the Corinthians** until **the offender (2:5)** had been brought to repentance and restored to fellowship (see [Ap](#) – **Forgiving the Offender**).

Indeed, this is why I wrote “the severe letter” **as I did – so that when I came, I would not have to be pained by those who ought to give me the greatest joy.** **Paul** expected **his** letter to cause **his** readers to take the necessary steps to remove the source of the friction which existed between **them** and **their apostle**. During **the painful visit Paul** had endured much **pain** by **the offender**, while **the Corinthians**, who should have made **Paul** rejoice, apparently stood by and did nothing. “The severe letter” was intended to ensure that this would not happen again. That reconciliation with **them** would bring as much **joy** to **them** as it would for **Paul** because **they** were all one in **joy** as well as in sorrow. **For I had enough confidence in all of you that you would share my joy (2:3).** **Paul** could tackle the thorny problem of the discipline of **the one who caused pain, confident** of the basic goodwill of **the Corinthians** towards **him** at this point.⁶⁶

Paul was not stoic about the **pain** the dispute had caused **him**, but expressed the depth of **his** own feelings on the matter. **He wrote** “the severe letter” **to the Corinthians with a greatly distressed, anguished heart, and with many tears, not in order to cause them pain, but to get them to realize how very much he loved them (2:4).** **His** greatest desire was that **they** would obey the Word, discipline **the offender**, and bring purity and peace to the congregation. **Faithful are the wounds of a friend; but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful (Proverbs 27:6).** On the one hand, **Paul** knew that **his** words would **wound** those **he loved**, and this brought **him** much **pain**. But, on the other hand,

he also knew (as every loving parent knows) that there is a big difference between *hurting* someone and *harming* them. Sometimes those who **love** us must *hurt* us in order to keep us from *harming* ourselves.⁶⁷

When we have conflicts, when we stop working together, what holds us together is **love** for **God**, **love** for **His Word**, **love** for the body of **Messiah**, and **love** for each other. That was the solution to the division between those in **Corinth**, and for us today. So how do we do that? By **keeping our eyes on Yeshua, the source and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 12:2 HCSB)**. When we **keep our eyes on Yeshua**, when conflict comes (and it will), we will endure. When we deal with difficulties, we will make it through. We shouldn’t fight each other for control, but work together as a part of the body of **Messiah**. When we do that, we can accomplish everything that **ADONAI** has for us.