

**A Change in Plans
2 Corinthians 1:23-2:4
Part 5**

How should we respond to a brother or sister in Christ when they are struggling to walk by faith rather than sight? Who are struggling to walk in the Spirit rather than in the flesh? In other words, who are more concerned about serving themselves rather than serving the Lord and others? How should we respond to them? Should we criticize them? Should we attack them? Should we ignore them? Should we talk about them to others? Of course not!

There is only one response that would be acceptable and that is to seek, through whatever means available to us, to serve them and to serve them unconditionally no matter what. Isn't this what Christ did for us and has continued to do for us? Absolutely! And this is exactly what we need to purpose ourselves to do when see a brother or sister in Christ struggling in their faith.

Now let me warn you of something. Just because we might purpose ourselves to serve someone doesn't mean necessarily that the person or persons that we are seeking to serve will necessarily cooperate or even appreciate what we are seeking to do. And it is at this point that we must not give in to our flesh, but must in the strength, which Christ supplies, continue to serve just as Christ has always continued to serve us.

And certainly this is exactly what Paul faced with the Corinthian Church. They were struggling in their faith and had very much become self-serving. And how did respond? Did he criticize them, attack them, ignore them, and talk about them? No! He did exactly what he should have done. He purposed to serve them and to serve them unconditionally. And did the Corinthians quickly respond to his attempts to serve them? No! And did they appreciate his attempts to serve them? No! Rather Paul's integrity, in light of certain changes he had made in his travel plans, came under attack.

And this brings us back to our current study of **2 Corinthians 1:12-2:4** which is Paul's response to the attack that had been leveled against him. How did Paul respond to the charges against him that he lacked personal integrity in 2 Corinthians 1:12-2:4?

This is how he responded. Paul, first of all, responded to the charges against him by introducing the testimony of his conscience (2 Corinthians 1:12-14).

Paul, secondly, responded to the charges against him by denying them (2 Corinthians 1:15-17).

Paul, thirdly, responded to the charges against him by affirming his faithfulness as a messenger of God (2 Corinthians 1:18-22).

But Paul is not done. Paul has a fourth thing to say in response to the charges that had been made against him.

And what is my hope for this message as we examine Paul's fourth and final response to the charges that had been made against him? My hope is this: that God would use this message to inspire us to extend care for our brothers and sisters in Christ when they are struggling spiritually and to do so unconditionally to the end, no matter how difficult it might be for us, rather than criticizing them, ignoring them or attacking them. May God protect us from such wicked behavior.

So, what was Paul's fourth and final response to the charges that had been made against him? Paul, fourthly, responded to the charges against him by explaining his motivation for his most recent change in travel plans (2 Corinthians 1:23-2:4).

When I speak about his most recent change in travel plans I am not talking about the change of plans that he had defended earlier in this chapter in **verses 15-22**. But I am talking about an even more recent change in travel plans. A change that he felt needed to be explained further in terms of its specific motivation.

But before we begin to consider Paul's explanation of his motivation for his most recent change we need to review Paul's original travel plan and then the subsequent changes to that plan and then his most recent change.

Paul initially visited the city of Corinth on his second missionary journey and established the church. This was Paul's first visit. And this first visit is recorded for us in **Acts 18**. After this initial visit Paul, in responding to problems that had arisen in the church, wrote his first letter to them. A letter

that we presently do not have but that is referenced in **1 Corinthians 5:9**. It was apparently in this letter that Paul first indicated to the Corinthians that he intended to visit them. And what did he say to them about what he intended to do?

He apparently told them that it was his intent at some point in time to come to them on his way to Macedonia and then again to come to them on his way back from Macedonia. Did Paul actually carry this plan out? No! In fact, in the very next letter to them, his second letter to them, the letter that we know as **1 Corinthians** written to address ongoing problems in Corinth, he gives them a different plan. In this revised plan he no longer is planning to visit them twice but rather only once but for a far more extended time. We see this plan spelled out for us in **1 Corinthians 16:5-9**.

The Corinthians in reading about this change of plans most likely did not initially get very upset, disappointed perhaps but not upset. But then certain false teachers arrived at Corinth and attached themselves to the church. And it appears that they took this occasion or this change of plans to attack Paul, accusing him of being fickle and self-motivated and telling the Corinthians that they could neither trust him or his words.

Paul, in response to this threat to the health and welfare of the Corinthian church, left Ephesus during his third missionary journey and made an emergency trip, his second trip, to the city of Corinth, a trip totally different than the trip that he had initially proposed as a possibility in his first letter and referenced in **2 Corinthians 1:15-16** and a trip totally different than the trip that he had proposed as a possibility in his second letter or more specifically in **1 Corinthians 16:5-9**. So how did this emergency trip go?

This trip did not go well. It was a trip filled with much sorrow. Why? The church at Corinth did not respond to what he had to say. In fact, one individual in particular verbally attacked him while the church sat on their hands and did nothing. This visit therefore has become known as the “**sorrowful visit.**” After this visit, his second visit to the Corinthians, Paul left Corinth and returned back to Ephesus and wrote a third letter to them, that we presently do not have, that has become known as the “**severe letter,**” a letter in which he apparently told the Corinthians that it was his intent not to return to them “**in sorrow again.**” In other words, Paul drew a line in the sand. He did not want to have a repeat performance of his last

visit, the so-called “**sorrowful visit**,” so he purposed to not to come to them again until things had changed.

And did they change? Yes! They responded to the “**severe letter**” and made certain very appropriate changes. But even though the situation in the church was much better there was still more work to be done. So Paul wrote to them **2 Corinthians** while in Macedonia to prepare them for his next trip or his third trip to them, which was, in fact, imminent.

And in writing this letter, the very letter we are now studying, Paul decided to explain the reason why he had once again changed his travel plans when he, most likely in the “**severe letter**,” told the Corinthians that he would not come to them until things got better. And where does he supply for us this explanation? He supplies it for us in the verses that we will be studying this morning. He will supply it for us in **2 Corinthians 1:23-2:4**.

And what we will discover is that Paul’s motivation in changing his plans yet once again was not based in some kind of frivolous self-serving impulse but rather on his constant unwavering concern for those God had entrusted to him as an apostle of Christ and which, of course, in this case was the Corinthians.

So now let us begin by looking at **2 Corinthians 1:23**. “**But I call God as witness to my soul, that to spare you I did not come again to Corinth.**” So, what is Paul talking about here in this verse. He is talking about his response to the “**sorrowful visit**” when he chose to write to them the “**severe letter**” when he apparently drew a line in the sand and indicated that he would not visit them again until things changed in Corinth and had changed for the better. This is what he is referring to.

But why did he do this? Why did he draw this line in the sand? Paul is now going to tell us? And he begins with these words, “**But I call God as witness.**” Paul, in calling God as a witness, was in effect swearing that everything that he was about to say concerning the motivation for his recent change in travel plans was true.

And what was Paul’s motivation for his most recent change? Paul’s motivation for his most recent change in travel plans or choosing not to come to them again after his “**sorrowful visit**” was in order to spare them.

Isn't this what the verse says, **“But I call God as witness ... that to spare you I did not come again to Corinth.”**

So, what was Paul seeking to spare the Corinthians from? Paul changed his plans in order to spare the Corinthians from the rod of discipline that he himself would feel compelled to wield if he visited them while they were still unrepentant (1 Corinthians 4:21). Let me read for you **1 Corinthians 4:21. “What do you desire? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love and a spirit of gentleness?** So, what was Paul seeking to spare the Corinthians from by not visiting them again? He was seeking to spare them from the rod of discipline. This did not mean that he was not willing to wield it when it was necessary to wield it, but after his sorrowful visit obviously he did not feel that this was the right thing to do.

So did Paul actually have this kind of authority to wield or not to wield this rod of discipline in matters concerning the Corinthian church? Obviously he had this kind of authority. He was an apostle of Christ, and as an apostle of Christ he could choose to wield it or not to wield it. And in this case Paul chose not to wield it. And the primary reason for not wielding it, at least in nothing making another trip to them until changes were made, was in order to spare them.

The false teachers had told the Corinthians that Paul and his words could not be trusted. And they offered up his change in travel plans as an example of this, telling the Corinthians that he changed his travel plans only to serve himself.

Paul is now countering that accusation by explaining to them his most recent change, a change that was made after his **“sorrowful visit”** when he decided not to come to them again until certain changes had been made by them, changes that he would hope would come about after they read his **“severe letter”** that he had written from Ephesus. And what is the reason Paul gave for his most recent change in plans? He told them that he had changed his plans not to come again to them in order to spare them or in order to serve them.

This is what he as an apostle of Christ in all his dealings with the Corinthians had been seeking to do. He was never seeking to lord it over

them or to use the authority he possessed as an apostle to serve his own ends. Paul makes this clear to the Corinthians in **verse 24**.

Let me now read for you **2 Corinthians 1:24**. **“Not that we lord it over your faith, but are workers with you for your joy; for in your faith you are standing firm.”** In other words, Paul wanted the Corinthians to know that whatever authority he possessed as an apostle of Christ, he possessed in order to serve them and to bring them joy as his fellow co-laborers (2 Corinthians 1:24).

Paul, as an apostle of Christ, was not about using his authority in order to serve himself. Rather Paul, as an apostle of Christ, was all about using his authority to serve the Corinthians. And Paul’s desire to serve the Corinthians certainly was what he was seeking to do when he, after his **“sorrowful visit,”** chose not to visit them again until things had changed for the better.

Paul was apparently convinced unless the Corinthians changed the only thing that would result from a another visit to them would be an overwhelming sense of sorrow and an absence of joy (2 Corinthians 2:1-2). And Paul was not just speaking just about an overwhelming sense of sorrow and an absence of joy on the part of the Corinthians he was also speaking about an overwhelming sense of sorrow and an absence of joy on his part as well.

Let us now go to **2 Corinthians 2:1-2**. **“But I determined for my own sake, that I would not come to you in sorrow again.** [Not only in respect to their sorrow, “the sorrow of chastisement,” but his sorrow as well the “sorrow of disappointment.” And then what does it say?] **(2) For if I cause you sorrow, who then makes me glad but the one whom I made sorrowful?**

Not only does Paul believe that a return visit to the Corinthians, before changes are made for the better, would result in an overwhelming sense of sorrow for himself and for them as well, but that it would result in a total absence of joy between them as well.

Paul, therefore in light of his belief that another visit to the Corinthians would have been highly unprofitable, chose to write the “severe letter” instead (2 Corinthians 2:3).

Let me now read for you **2 Corinthians 2:3** and see if this is not so. **“This is the very thing I wrote you** [in other words, in the “severe letter” that immediately followed my “sorrowful visit” to you when I had returned back to Ephesus. And why did I write it?], **“so that when I came, I would not have sorrow from those who ought to make me rejoice; having confidence in you all that my joy would be the joy of you all.”** So why had Paul chosen to write this “severe letter,” a letter that most likely revealed his intent to stay away from them until certain changes had been made? He chose to write it in order to avoid a painful personal confrontation that he believed would produce no good thing at all. He truly felt that in their case, until changes were made, that writing to them even in a very severe tone would be better.

And this is what he did in the hope that if they responded to the letter properly and made the changes that he believed needed to be made that the result would be joy in the church and for him as well.

The “severe letter” that Paul wrote to the Corinthians was a very difficult letter for Paul to write but he wrote because of his great love for them (2 Corinthians 2:4).

Let me now read for you **2 Corinthians 2:4** and see if this is not so. **“For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you with many tears; not so that you would be made sorrowful, but that you might know the love which I have especially for you.”**

The word “anguish” (SUNOCHE) is used elsewhere only once to describe what the nations will experience on the Day of the Lord when God will give alarming signs in the heavens and on the earth (Luke 21:25). Paul expressed this inward emotion, or in other words this anguish, **“with many tears”** as this letter, this “severe letter” was written. And why did he tell them here in **2 Corinthians 2:4** what great anguish that he had experienced in writing this letter and how that anguish had been accompanied by many tears?

Paul spoke of his “anguish” and his many tears not to make them sorrowful but to communicate his great love he had for them.

Our brothers and sisters in Christ are not here for us to criticize, ignore or attack when they are struggling. They are here to be served unconditionally

to the end no matter how difficult this might be for us. This kind of abounding love is what characterized the life of the Apostle Paul as he continuously and unconditionally continued to reach out to the Corinthian church in all of their weakness. And this is the kind of love that needs to characterize our fellowship as well.

May God allow us not only to be grieved when our brothers and sisters in Christ are spiritually struggling, but the grace to serve them unconditionally to the end.