

Tear-Stained Letters

2 Corinthians 1:23-2:4

January 28, 2007

There's a story between the lines.

What I mean by that is, as we have started into 2 Corinthians, if we read the book carefully, we see the story that led to Paul's writing the book.

And it's not a happy story. It's the story of a church planter (Paul) who gets a church going in a wild town, the Las Vegas of the Roman empire, and when he gets it up and running, he moves on to start other churches. He hears that things aren't going so well back in Corinth, so he writes them a letter to tell them to make things right. That letter is called 1 Corinthians. After a while, he comes through the area for a visit. And the visit was miserable. Yes, they had cleaned up some problems, but then they just went out and got a bunch of new problems.

And one thing that they'd decided was that **they didn't like Paul any more.** "Who is this guy, telling us what to believe and how to live? Who is this shrimpy Jewish guy telling us Greeks how to live? He says we have the Spirit of God, so our opinions are as good as his! **We don't need Paul.**"

And just then Paul comes walking in. "Hi guys, good to see you. I really missed you guys. Oh, and while I'm here, I'm going to take up that offering I told about, the one for the starving Jewish believers in Jesus, back in Judea where they're having a famine."

What should have been a happy reunion turned into a chilly visit. Ever have one of those chilly visits? Maybe a relative comes for a week that seems about a year, because you

never know what you might say that would set them off?

So Paul's there for a visit, and after a while the church there says to him, "OK, we took up that offering. Here it is. And here's a nice Certificate of Appreciation we're giving you as our founding pastor. But Paul, we have to tell you something: **We don't like you anymore.** We like our new teachers. They tell us about how to have health and wealth and you're always going on and on about Jesus and the cross and about personal sacrifice and morality. We're sick of it. *Adios, muchacho!*"

So Paul went on his way. And maybe as he went, he was boiling mad. "Call me a big dummy, huh? I'll show them. I'll come back and put those wild Corinthians in their place." But the more he thought about it, and the more he prayed about it, his feelings changed. He stopped being angry. Instead, God filled his heart with love and affection toward them. He determined not to give up on them, and also not to go back, at least not yet. He realized that time was needed to let things cool off. Then, a little later, he wrote one letter we no longer have. That was probably a pretty stern letter, and it had the effect of correcting that majority of the church members in Corinth. Later, he wrote this letter we call 2 Corinthians to deal with the remaining issues.

The last two weeks we saw the Paul defend himself from the accusation that his change in travel plans showed that he was not being led by God. Paul has shown instead what a life truly given over to God looks like: while it may be a life of "deadly peril" (vs. 10), it is still a life in which the Spirit of God comes and comforts us. "Comfort" is not ours apart from full involvement in the work of the Kingdom. We're not talking about life in a spiritual

hammock; we're talking about life in spiritual combat with brief rest breaks.

Let's read, in one big gulp, 1:23-2:4, with a few comments:

23 I call God as my witness that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth. 24 Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm. 1 So I made up my mind that I would not make another painful visit to you. 2 For if I grieve you, who is left to make me glad but you whom I have grieved?

Now he explains why he didn't come back the way he'd originally planned: *to spare the Corinthians*. To spare them the pain of another visit. I'll expand on that in a minute.

3 I wrote as I did so that when I came I should not be distressed by those who ought to make me rejoice. I had confidence in all of you, that you would all share my joy. 4 For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you.

Now he comments a little on the letter he sent them, the one we no longer have. While we don't have it, evidently it must have been quite a letter. "I wrote to you out of great anguish of heart and with many tears." It was his **Shock and Awe letter**, full of both tears and strong corrections. It was a hard letter to write, and a hard letter to read. But as we'll see next week, and later in chapter 7, it had the desired effect of getting most of the church back on course.

Paul poured out his heart to the Corinthians. Everyone seems to think that Paul was a hard, unfeeling guy. I don't read him that way at all.

I've been studying his letters for over 30 years, and one of the most striking things about them is the amount of emotion—the amount of **love**—he packs into his letters. The reality is that Paul is just worried sick about the spiritual health of the churches, and that he's filled with a passion not only to reach lost people, but to see to it that the churches are healthy, godly, God-honoring bodies of believers.

While we sometimes see flashes of Paul's ego in his letters, I am way more impressed by how much Paul reigns in his self-interests in favor of the interests of his people.

Let's pause there and reflect for a moment. What kind of revolution would occur if we all took that same stance one toward another? What if we developed a passion for the spiritual growth of every other person who makes us this church that's like what Paul had for the Corinthians and the other churches Paul planted or came to his attention?

We pray for one another's health needs, and so we should. But somehow we consider it insulting to pray for one another's spiritual growth. Really now, how often do we pray for our brothers and sisters to grow up spiritually, to be healed spiritually?

Let's get real. If someone prayed aloud each week in the class you attend, "Lord, I pray that we'd all grow up spiritually and stop acting like little children," wouldn't you find that irritating? "Where does she get off? Who died and made her the boss of me? And why does she keep looking at me when she prays like that?"

The most important thing in the world is reaching lost people with the Good News of Jesus. The second most important thing is that those who follow Jesus **act** like Jesus,

look like Jesus, **love** like Jesus and **pray** like Jesus.

Those are the passions of Paul: reaching the lost, and a church that so pure and glorious that it's a proper Bride of Christ. In 2 Corinthians 11:2, Paul tells the church should be like a bride desperately in love with her Lord, and utterly devoted to His will and ways.

I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him.

This was Paul's passion: to present the church to Christ the Husband as a pure virgin bride. The apostle John said much the same thing in 3 John 4—it says it in a different way, but it means the same thing:

I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.

You can see more and more why Paul was a distressed as he was over the bad attitudes and bad beliefs that were infiltrating the Corinthians church. The witness of the good news about Jesus would go down the drain in Corinth unless the believers there got their act together. Now what is he going to do? How did he handle the situation?

Well, first of all, he decided to not to fight in the worldly way. He had every right as an apostle of Christ Jesus to come in like a Wild West sheriff and lock `em up and hang `em high. Jesus Himself could be rough at times. Remember how He cleansed the temple of the moneychangers? Remember how he blasted the Pharisees as "whitewashed tombs, full of dead men's bones"?

But he didn't do that. For one thing, Paul was convinced that that church of Corinth wasn't full of false teachers. They weren't heretics. They were his brothers and sisters who were being **influenced** by teachers of falsehood. He saw their situation as a **temporary** one, and one that could be fixed.

Now let's put what Paul did into three ideas that will help us a lot when we're in the midst of troubling situations with fellow believers. Those three ideas are:

- Slow down
- Show mercy
- Keep God's glory in view

There's a wonderful word that's emerged from the black community in the last 20 years or so: "dis." It's short for to **dis**respect, to **dis**miss, and to **dis**trust. Well, when Paul left Corinth, he felt he'd been **dissed**!

But Paul's anger mellowed into sadness for the misguided direction the Corinthians were taking. That sadness turned into intercessory prayer.

God gave Paul the presence of mind to **slow things down** when it came to the believers at Corinth. Instead of confronting them on the spot, he moved on to his next appointment, in Ephesus, across the Aegean. After waiting some time, after seeking God and praying, he sent the Tough Letter, the Shock and Awe Letter, to the Corinthians with his associate Titus. Paul then went north to Troas, a city built on the ruins of Troy (as in *Helen of Troy*), where Titus came and told him that the letter had its desired effect, and that the church at Corinth was coming around. (We'll see more about that in chapter 7.)

Paul **slowed down**. I don't know about you, but most of the time I feel the need for "swift retaliation" is when I get into trouble. Speed usually indicates that **emotion**, not reflection, is driving my decisions.

Speed usually means that I'm not taking the time to take the issue before God. One time I had a disagreement with another pastor. I wanted to chop his head off! It was one of those "How dare he!" moments. He **dissed** me, he dissed my church, he dissed my members. It took about two days for God to sit me down and say, "I don't even want you to talk to this guy until you can truly say that you **love** him."

I replied, "Well, I guess he's OK, some days." God said, "Try again, boy."

I replied, "Alright, I guess he's slightly above average and I guess his mother likes him." God said, "Keep going. And remember the cross."

I said, "The cross? You're not playing fair! OK, I forgive him." God said, "Not enough. Go on."

And I said, "Alright. I love him. He's my brother. I would die in his place. We've got to work this out." And God said, "Now you can call him up." And you know, it all worked out.

That's **mercy**. **Slowing down** and showing **mercy** go together. The Corinthians didn't deserve the mercy they were shown by Paul, and **I didn't deserve the mercy I was shown on the cross**. That reality needs to carry over into all the relationships of my life, and yours!

And you don't deserve mercy either. The **mercy of God** isn't when God says, "Say,

you're not so bad." It's when God says, "You deserve condemnation. You deserve death. You deserve eternal separation from God in hell. That's what you **deserve**. But...My Son has died for you, and so I show you My mercy. He took the penalty of all that, and now I extend to you an invitation to be part of my family. I extend to you life. I extend to you eternal fellowship with God."

Mercy! Look at what Paul says in Ephesians 5:1-2:

*1 Be **imitators of God**, therefore, as dearly loved children 2 and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*

Imitators of God—that means we must be people of **mercy**. He is merciful; he calls us to be merciful. Jesus says in Matthew 5:7, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy."

So Paul slowed down and Paul, in obedience to Jesus' own words, showed mercy. There's a third thing he did here:

He kept God's glory in view

It wasn't about Paul getting "dissed." It wasn't a matter of pride. It wasn't even that the Corinthian believers were messing up. The thing that really broke Paul's heart was that if the church there kept going down this path, God would be denied the glory He deserved.

God would be denied the glory of a pure virgin bride—a church wholly devoted to love of her Lord.

God would be denied the glory of a church with solid teaching about God—about His nature and character, His love revealed in Jesus, His plan of the ages.

God would be denied the glory of new believers, new worshippers. A church consumed with health, wealth and personal success would quickly lose their passion for lost people.

God would be denied the glory of missions. A church like the one Corinth was on their way to becoming would stop caring about lost people elsewhere in Greece or anywhere else for that matter.

The loss of glory given to God was the ultimate pain to Paul's soul. Yes, he was sorry for the sake of the church members at Corinth, but there was something even more important: God getting "**dissed**" by His own people. Getting dissed by their upside down priorities, by their selfish pride, by their buying into falsehood. That's what really broke Paul's heart. That's how he was able to get his own sense of hurt and rejection out of the way.

I was at a church conference one time. Some meaningless resolution was being debated. It was downright depressing. I walked out into the hall, and a member of the committee came out at the same time. "Something wrong?" he asked. "Well," I replied. "I keep asking, what does God get out of this? Does He get more glory?" He wasn't expecting that. He thought for a moment and said, "I never thought of that. Maybe we should."

There's no "maybe" here! God's glory is what it's all about. May God grant us the wisdom to always put His glory first—no matter what! Amen?

PRAYER/END