

## 2. Paul defends his ministry

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[ 0 : 01 ] Well, good evening, friends. Let's turn now to the second letter of Paul to the Corinthians for our Bible reading. And you'll find this on page 964 in our big church Bibles.

Johnny, should I take this down a bit? Am I okay? Good. So second letter of Paul to the Corinthians, and I'll be reading from chapter 1, verse 12, to chapter 2, verse 11.

Chapter 1, verse 12, to chapter 2, verse 11. And if you just have a look with me at verse 12, instead of the word simplicity, I'm going to read holiness, which I think is a better translation there.

And likewise, in verses 13 and 14, the verb acknowledge, I will translate as understand, which again I think fits better there. So 2 Corinthians, chapter 1, verse 12.

For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience, that we have behaved in the world with holiness and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom, but by the grace of God, and supremely so towards you.

[ 1 : 26 ] For we are not writing to you anything other than what you read and understand. And I hope you will fully understand, 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.

Because I was sure of this, I wanted to come to you first, so that you might have a second experience of grace. 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.

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?

As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been yes and no. 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.

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.

[ 2 : 45 ] And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, and who has also put his seal on us, and given us his spirit in our hearts as a guarantee.

But I call God to witness against me. It was to spare you that I refrained from coming again to Corinth. Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, for you stand firm in your faith.

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

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.

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.

[ 3 : 50 ] Now, if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure, not to put it too severely, to all of you.

For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough. So you should rather turn to forgive him and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him.

For this is why I wrote that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything. Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. What I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ, so that we would not be outwitted by Satan, for we are not ignorant of his designs.

Amen. This is the word of the Lord, and may it be a blessing to us this evening. Eight. Well, shall we turn again to 2 Corinthians chapter 1, page 964.

I'm calling this series of sermons, The Pastor Who Never Gives Up, and this particular one tonight, Paul Defends His Ministry.

[ 5 : 28 ] Paul Defends His Ministry. Now, let me start by pointing out something which I pointed out a moment ago, and you will have spotted it, and that is that this passage that we're looking at tonight is really quite difficult.

I do hope we'll be able to get our hands on the main thrust of it as we go along, but it's not easy material to follow. And that is true of quite large parts of 2 Corinthians.

There are some parts of the letter, I guess the parts that are best known, which are reasonably straightforward, but several of the chapters here are amongst the most difficult things that Paul wrote.

But friends, do not be dismayed. Let's not be dismayed by that. And let me encourage you by pointing out a couple of things which will help us with this sense of this being a rather difficult letter.

The first is that the relationship between Paul and the Corinthian Christians has a big hinterland, if I can use that word. There was a lot going on between Paul and the Corinthians that we know nothing about.

[ 6 : 31 ] I didn't mention this a fortnight ago when we started the letter, but it's quite clear that Paul wrote not two letters to the Corinthians, but four, two of which have disappeared.

And of these four letters, the one that we know as 1 Corinthians was the second letter, and this one, 2 Corinthians, was the fourth letter. Now, I won't take up time now by demonstrating all this from the text, but if you do read your way through 1 and 2 Corinthians and use a good commentary, I think you'll soon be persuaded of the fact that there were four letters.

There might even have been more, but there were at least four. If we ask the question, why then did the Lord not cause the first letter and the third letter to be preserved for later generations, the most likely answer is that the two lost letters would have dealt very narrowly with local circumstances and local problems at Corinth and therefore might not have been of great use to the worldwide church.

Whereas the two letters that have been included here in the Bible, 1 and 2 Corinthians, while very much focused on the needs of the Corinthian church, also have a great deal to say to the whole of the Lord's church across the generations.

So as I say, there's a big hinterland to this relationship between Paul and the Corinthians. And that means that unless ancient manuscripts or parchments were to turn up, which nobody has seen for more than 19 centuries, and the likelihood of that happening is vanishingly small, I guess, it means that there are things going on, or there were things going on between Paul and the church at Corinth that nobody is ever going to discover.

[ 8 : 11 ] And that's why it's hard to understand some of the things that Paul is talking about in 2 Corinthians. So for example, when he writes in chapter 2, verses 5 to 11, about this man who has had to be punished and who now needs to be forgiven and lovingly restored to the fellowship, we don't know who this man was, and we don't know exactly how he'd misbehaved.

But of course, Paul knew, and the Corinthians knew, we don't and we shall never know. It's a little bit like being in a room with somebody else who is making a telephone call.

So there are two of you in the room. There's somebody else with the phone to their head. And you can hear what they're saying, but you can't hear what's coming into the phone from the other end. You only get one end of the conversation.

So that means that your understanding of the whole situation is rather impaired. It's a bit like that with us and the Corinthians. But let's not be daunted by this difficulty. Certain things in 2 Corinthians may remain dark and obscure, but there's a great deal here which we can understand very clearly and which will be profitable for us, and I trust we'll see at least some of that this evening.

Well, now here's a second thing which I hope will also be helpful. Let's learn not to be dismayed by the atmosphere of trouble and difficulty which fills this letter.

[ 9 : 34 ] There are some very strong passages in 2 Corinthians. Paul uses strong language. Some of the passages are so strong that we might even feel, I wish that the Corinthians had been kinder and better and more humble and more holy, and I wish Paul had never had to say these strong rebuking things to them.

Look for example, if you will. Turn with me to the very end of chapter 12. 2 Corinthians 12. I just want to read you an example of something strongish. So chapter 12, verse 20.

Paul is planning and preparing to come to them eventually. So he says this, 1220, For I fear that perhaps when I come, I may find you not as I wish, and that you may find me not as you wish.

In other words, that I've got to be a fierce disciplinarian. That perhaps there may be quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder. I fear that when I come again, my God may humble me before you, because I'm so upset at what I discover, and I may have to mourn over many of those who sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual immorality, and sensuality that they have practiced.

This is the third time I'm coming to you. Every charge against an individual must be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. I warned those who sinned before, and all the others, and I warned them now while absent, as I did when present on my second visit, that if I come again, I will not spare them.

[ 11 : 10 ] It's enough to singe your eyebrows, isn't it? And I think there's a part of us that would gladly slip quietly out of the room, rather than have to face a volley of words like that.

But Paul had to say these things to the Corinthians, and the Corinthians needed to hear them. And if we're wise, we too will listen to them and learn to fear God. Really, it's a great encouragement to people like us to see the pulsating vitality of these first century Christian relationships.

This is church life in the raw. Any church that is really subjected to the word of God is going to be a lively and sometimes uncomfortable place to be in.

Do we really want to be in a stayed, safe kind of church where the big goal is to maintain the status quo, keep everything quiet? We'll perish the thought.

So let's not be deterred by the difficult aspects of 2 Corinthians. If there are parts of the letter which are difficult to understand, there'll be plenty in the letter that is perfectly clear.

[ 12 : 18 ] And if there are other parts that are easy to understand but difficult to stomach, then let's be glad that we have an opportunity to have our stomachs strengthened. All right, well, let's turn to chapter 1, verse 12.

And I'll just start by reading that one verse. For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience that we behaved in the world with holiness and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom, but by the grace of God and supremely so towards you.

Now, it's pretty obvious what Paul is doing throughout this passage from chapter 1, verse 12 to chapter 2, verse 11. He's defending himself and he's justifying his behavior.

So he starts off, chapter 1, verse 12, by saying, my conscience is clear. Now, nobody writes like that unless they have been accused of behaving insincerely.

And that's exactly how the Corinthians have been accusing Paul. Look on to verse 17 there. They're accusing him of vacillating. That means changing his mind and not sticking to his original word or his original plans.

[ 13 : 31 ] They've been saying, you can't trust Paul to keep his word. He's the kind of man who says one thing and does another. He'll say yes one day and no on the next day. And the whole of this passage from chapter 1, verse 12 to chapter 2, verse 11 is a robust defense by Paul of his actions towards them.

Now, before we get into the detail of the passage, let's pause to notice what a surprising thing this is. Here we have this great Christian leader, this great apostle of Jesus Christ who has been loved and admired and followed by the Christian church for 20 centuries.

And here he is being fiercely criticized. His authority is being undermined and his integrity is being questioned. In this first verse, verse 12, he's saying, my boast, my conviction, is that I've acted with sincerity and holiness.

I refute the charge of my critics that I've been untrustworthy. Now, doesn't that take your breath away? For a man like Paul to have to defend himself like that.

And we're going to find over these weeks as we read on through 2 Corinthians, that he is sounding that note of self-defense and self-justification again and again. You might say that the whole of this letter at one level is a defense of his conduct and ministry.

[ 14 : 55 ] Paul is being stoutly criticized at Corinth and he feels that he must defend himself. Now, let me make a couple of observations on this. The first is that Christian leaders will be criticized.

In fact, the more vigorously and the more fruitfully they exercise leadership, the more fiercely they're likely to be criticized. When you read the pages of church history, you find that leaders who have had the most influence for the gospel have all had to fight fierce theological battles and they have been very unpopular at times.

Their lives have been punctuated by battles and warfare. Whereas the leaders who have been least effective in church history are the ones who have not wanted to ruffle any feathers.

They've wanted to live a quiet life. They've wanted to preserve the status quo. Let's just keep things gently ticking along but let's not risk trouble by trying to break any new ground.

And leaders like that smile sweetly and they are very, very nice. But not much happens. Let me then have a word to those here who might aspire to Christian leadership.

[ 16 : 10 ] If you want to be in due course a Christian leader and if you have the necessary qualities then that's a good thing. We're always looking for the leaders of the next generation. And as you know here at the Tron Church and also with the Cornhill training courses we provide training and apprenticeships for would-be leaders.

But friends, don't think that Christian leadership is a smooth, safe, easy thing to do. You cannot be endlessly sweet and nice and gentle and be an effective Christian leader.

The effective Christian leader has to struggle with people at times. The whole of 2 Corinthians is a kind of wrestling match. Here is Paul wrestling with the Corinthians.

13 chapters. It's like 13 rounds in the ring. And he's wrestling with them because he loves them and he's determined to persuade them that his understanding of the gospel is right and of the Christian life and theirs has been badly skewed.

He's the pastor who will not give up on his wayward Corinthians. And the reason he keeps wrestling and battling with them is not because he's a tyrant or a control freak but because he loves them and he's determined to bring them to Christian maturity even if it should be very costly to him.

[ 17 : 29 ] So there's the first observation. Christian leaders who are really useful will be criticized. If we don't want to get hot it's better to stay out of the kitchen.

Now a second observation. Christian leaders will sometimes be forced to defend themselves and their reputations as Paul does here.

Now we're bound to ask why. You see we might feel like saying to Paul brother Paul just chill be more relaxed about your reputation. Does it really matter if people speak ill of you?

If they call Jesus Beelzebul you can only expect people to say some pretty nasty things about his apostles. But let their criticisms be like water off a duck's back to you.

In any case you've said yourself that your aim in life is that you're not concerned to please men but rather to please God. So if you're not a man pleaser why should you be concerned that people might be saying unpleasant and untrue things about you?

[ 18 : 33 ] Let them say what they like. If your conscience is clear before God does it matter what men say about you? To which Paul's reply I think would be yes it does matter and yet not for my personal sake but for the sake of Christ and the gospel and the church.

I think we can safely say that Paul didn't care two hoots for what people might say about him as a private individual. He wasn't proud. He expected people to call him and the other apostles fools and oddballs and even the scum of the earth.

As a private individual he didn't mind what people thought of him and neither should we. But Paul was not just a private individual with a private reputation.

The fact is that the reputation of the church and the gospel and the Lord Jesus was inextricably tied up with his reputation. If lots of people began to say that Paul and his colleagues were insincere and untrustworthy and that's the charge that he's defending himself against here then it's only a short step further for people to say that the gospel is untrustworthy and Jesus is a charlatan and the church is a very flaky organization.

And that's exactly what we've seen happening throughout the world in every generation. When Christian leaders don't behave in a godly fashion the church the Bible the gospel and the Lord Jesus are brought into disrepute.

[ 20 : 09 ] Now there's a very painful example of this going on at the moment in the way the Church of England is trying to handle this question of who should be made bishops. I'm sure you've been listening to news reports in recent weeks about this.

Leaders and when I say leaders I mean ordained leaders and lay leaders in the Church of England are raising two questions. First should women be bishops and secondly should men living in civil partnerships be bishops.

bishops. Now if senior leaders in the Church of England were uniformly willing to follow true godliness which means gladly submitting to the Bible's teaching they would know with absolute clarity what the answer is to both of those questions about bishops.

Paul teaches the church of all generations in 1 Timothy chapter 3 and Titus chapter 1 that bishops or pastors or elders they're all the same individuals in Paul's teaching.

These people should be men and they should be sexually chaste. So if they're married they should be faithful to their wives and if unmarried then single and celibate and without any suggestion or whiff of impropriety in their relationships.

[ 21 : 26 ] But it's because considerable numbers of senior people in the Church of England are not willing to submit to Paul's clear teaching that the Church of England has got itself into such a moral mess and the consequences that the Church, the Bible, the Gospel and the Lord Jesus are brought into disrepute.

You'll know that the press and the media have been making mincemeat of the Church and laughing up their sleeves at the Church. But the Lord is dishonored. Sometimes the world recognizes ungodliness more quickly than the Church does.

Now this is the reason why Paul is so concerned to keep spotless the reputation of his work and his methods and his ways of dealing with people. If his critics can win the day, if they can establish their claim that Paul is substandard and unreliable, then the whole Gospel mission which was so young and fragile at this stage could have been irretrievably damaged.

Well, let's see how this is worked out in our passage and I've got three points about Paul's work. The first is from chapter 1 verses 12 to 14 where Paul insists that his work is done with a clear conscience.

In verse 12, Paul makes a bold claim. He says, our boast. Now that word boast is a very significant word in 2 Corinthians and Paul is going to use it frequently as the letter develops and he's going to use it in an ironic sense in the later chapters of the letter.

[ 23 : 06 ] But it's not ironic here. Here in verse 12, he's simply saying the boast, our boast, our firm, strong confidence is that our conscience is clear. Our conscience testifies to our own hearts that we have behaved honorably in the world with holiness and godly sincerity.

not by earthly wisdom, he says, and earthly wisdom is bound to be self-centered and devious, but rather by the grace of God and, and just notice how the last four words of verse 12 focus what Paul is saying, and he says, supremely so towards you, you Corinthians.

and then he unpacks what he means in verses 13 and 14. And the nub of what he's saying there is that they haven't properly or fully understood him.

He's saying in these verses, I hope you will fully understand us rather than only partially understanding us, which is the position to date. He's saying, your criticisms of me are based on an incomplete understanding.

understanding. Now friends, isn't that rather familiar territory? When you and I criticize other people, sometimes we do so because we don't properly understand the situation of the person that we're criticizing.

[ 24 : 28 ] It's a mistake to criticize people when we're not in possession of all the facts. And that's what Paul is saying here. You're not in possession of all the facts about me. But if you were, you would recognize fully that we have behaved towards you with utter sincerity.

And then look at the end of verse 14 where Paul sets his work in the light of the day of judgment. He's saying, if you did know the full facts, you would be as delighted with us on the day of Christ's return as we know we shall be delighted with you.

Now I've paraphrased that final clause of verse 14 and you'll see that Paul actually uses the word boast again there. And again, not in an ironic sense. He's using it there to express the joy and the exhilaration that he feels at the prospect of presenting the Corinthians to the Lord Jesus on the day of judgment.

He's picturing himself with them at the Lord's return. And he says, as it were, to the Lord, here they are, Lord Jesus, you're betrothed from Corinth. In fact, he's going to tell them later in the letter, in chapter 11, that he has betrothed them to Christ so as to present them as a pure virgin to the heavenly bridegroom.

It's as though he's wanting to say, look, Lord Jesus, at your bride. I am delighted with her, with these Corinthians. They're my boast before you. And that's what Paul is dreaming of doing at the end.

[ 25 : 59 ] But equally, in our verse 14, he's dreaming that they are going to boast of him in the Lord's presence. He's dreaming that they are going to say, Lord Jesus, we too are thrilled with Paul.

Thank you so much for sending us Paul to tell us the gospel and to teach us the Christian life. But Paul is saying here, you're in no position to dream that kind of dream at the moment, are you, brothers and sisters?

Because you're full of criticisms of us and you're not fully understanding where we're coming from. But the fact is, and our conscience testifies to this, that our behavior towards you, supremely towards you, Corinthians, has been holy and godly and sincere.

So there's the first plank in Paul's defense of himself to the Corinthians. My conscience is clear, Timothy and I have behaved in a godly fashion. Now secondly, and here I want us to look at the rest of chapter 1, verses 15 to 24.

Paul insists that his work reflects the reliability of Jesus. Now the Corinthians are clearly charging Paul with being untrustworthy and unreliable over his travel plans.

[ 27 : 17 ] That's the issue, the travel plans. In verse 16, he explains to them what his original travel plan was. So he says, I wanted to visit you at Corinth on my way to Macedonia and then to come back to you from Macedonia and then have you send me on my way to Judea.

And this particular travel plan was almost certainly to do with the collection of money, an important collection of money that Paul was seeking to raise from the Greek churches, the churches of Macedonia in northern Greece, Philippi and Thessalonica and so on, and also from the churches of southern Greece, Corinth particularly.

And then when Paul had gathered these funds together, he was going to take them hot foot to the churches of Judea in Israel who were suffering severe poverty at the time. And this was a great idea quite apart from the need to relieve poverty because this meant that the Gentile churches would be able to show loving, solid financial support to the Jewish churches.

And this lovingly given money would help to bind the Jewish and the Gentile Christians together. And that was something Paul was eager to do at every opportunity. He could see how vital it was for the effective ongoing mission of the gospel to have the Jewish churches and the Gentile churches singing from the same song sheet.

He was conscious there was always a danger of a rift and it was most important not to have two different churches. So that was his original plan. To go to Corinth, then to Macedonia, then back to Corinth and then on to Judea.

[ 28 : 50 ] And that plan had clearly been communicated to the Corinthians. That's what they were expecting him to do. But he changed his mind and he decided to postpone his visit and they were not happy.

And clearly they had communicated their unhappiness to him. Otherwise he wouldn't have written these things to them. And what were they saying about him? Well, verse 17 reflects just what they were saying.

He's a vacillator. He makes plans like a man of the flesh. Like a worldly man rather than a trustworthy Christian. He'll say yes one moment and then no a moment later.

Who can trust a yes-no man like that? Now we'll come back to verse 18 in just a moment. But look first at verse 23 where Paul explains the reason for changing his plans.

23, but I call God to witness against me. Very strong phrase that I call God to witness against me. It was to spare you that I refrained from coming again to Corinth.

[ 29 : 56 ] In other words, if I had stuck to plan A, it would have been a visit of confrontation and pain. And I wanted to spare you that. Or look on to chapter 2 verse 1.

I made up my mind not to make another painful visit to you. You see, there was so much in the Corinthians behavior. And you got the flavor of that from that little quotation from the very end of the book that I read.

There was so much that had to be confronted and addressed by Paul. Quarreling and disorder and sexual immorality and lots of other things. And Paul was not unwilling to confront them with these things at the right time, at the best time.

And he tells them in the very last chapter, chapter 13, that he is indeed going to come. But in his judgment, if he had come at the originally planned moment, it would have been too soon.

Now, modern church leaders, let's just think of this business of confronting wrongdoing in the church. Modern church leaders have a lot to learn from Paul here.

[ 30 : 59 ] Church leaders do have to call to account not only Christian individuals who may be misbehaving, but sometimes whole congregations have to be called to account for ungodly behavior.

And at Corinth, clearly, there were not only individuals misbehaving, but also, to some degree, the whole congregation were failing to discipline themselves, and Paul could not turn a blind eye to what was going on.

Friends, let me just add this. A congregation who has a leader, who has the courage to discipline the congregation when necessary, is a blessed congregation.

Blessed are those Christian churches whose pastors love them enough to bring the discipline of the Word of God to bear on their lives. A lot of pastors won't dare to do that.

They'll simply say, hey-ho, people will do as they please, and who am I to call them to account? But pastors and leaders who are taught by Paul will keep on pleading and working with fellow Christians who are stepping out of line.

[ 32 : 05 ] That's what Paul is doing here and throughout 2 Corinthians. He is the pastor who never gives up, but he judges his moments. He knows that discipline can be too heavy and too painful if he charges in like a bull too early on, and Paul is not going to do that, and that's why he decided to change his travel plans.

So let's look back to verses 18 to 22, because it's in those verses that Paul explains to the Corinthians the underlying reasons for his behavior. He's saying to them, you say that I'm a yes-no man.

You say that I'm a vacillator, but I'm not, and I'll tell you why. Verse 18. As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been yes and no.

For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silas and Timothy and I, was not yes and no, but in him it is always yes.

What Paul is asserting in these verses is that his thinking and behavior is entirely in line with that of the Lord Jesus. In this respect, Jesus, he is saying, came to fulfill all God's promises.

[ 33 : 23 ] Do you see it's there in verse 20? All the promises of God find their yes or their fulfillment in him. So, for example, did God promise in the Old Testament that there would eventually come a king of David's line to be king forever?



Yes, he did. And Jesus is the yes to that promise. Or did God promise that there would eventually come a high priest who would be a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek?

Yes, he did. And Jesus is that high priest. Did God promise in the Old Testament that a new covenant, far more far reaching in its effects than the covenant of Sinai, would eventually benefit the waiting world?

Yes, he did. And Jesus is the yes to that promise. I'm just illustrating here, but we could go on thinking about many other promises that God made in the Old Testament which are fulfilled by Jesus.

Now, Paul is saying to the Corinthians, Jesus did a thorough job, a 100% job. He didn't look at these Old Testament promises and then say to his father, father, well father, I'm happy to fulfill this one and that one, but I don't really fancy fulfilling that one and those two over there either, because fulfilling them would involve me in too much pain and difficulty.

[ 34 : 44 ] No, Paul is saying he was thorough. He did it all. Verse 20, all the promises of God find their yes in him. And then Paul thrusts his point home in verses 21 and 22.

Let me just paraphrase those two verses, 21 and 2. And it is God who establishes and confirms our position of authority with you in our shared belonging to Christ.

And it is God who has anointed us, Timothy and Silas and me, in other words, God who has approved us and commissioned us and authorized us to be your teachers.

And it is God who has put on us the seal of his Holy Spirit, like an old fashioned wax seal, indicating ownership. He has put his seal upon us. And his spirit has been not only put on us as a badge of authority, but put in us, in our hearts, as a guarantee of our authenticity.

So from verse 18 to verse 22, Paul is piling up several layers of powerful argument to show the Corinthians why they should and must put confidence in him and Silas and Timothy as trustworthy leaders and teachers.

[ 36 : 00 ] Our authenticity is guaranteed by God. That's what he's saying. He has put his spirit both on us and in us. And our behavior is based upon the faithful, true behavior and example of Jesus Christ.

So please take back your accusation that I'm a vacillator who changes his mind like a man of the world. God. Now might there be a little corner in our minds which is thinking this, Paul, do you have to be so strong?

Are you perhaps taking a sledgehammer to crack a nut? I mean this is only about travel plans, isn't it? Is it such a big deal as that? Now if we're thinking that question, the answer is that in truth it's about much more than just travel plans.

This travel plan business is just the tip of the iceberg. Much bigger issues are going to emerge as the letter develops. So Paul is establishing his authority with the Corinthians at this early stage in the letter because he's got to tackle some much bigger and weightier matters later on.

And he's got to do a lot more work later on to further establish his authority with the Corinthians. So Paul insists first that his conscience is clear, second that his work and his methods reflect the reliability of Jesus, and now third, Paul insists that he is motivated by a longing for the Corinthians' joy.

[ 37 : 34 ] Look with me at chapter 1 verse 24. We work with you for your joy. And again chapter 2 verse 3. I felt sure of all of you that my joy would be the joy of you all.

So what has happened to turn what should have been a joyful relationship between Paul and the Corinthians into this painful, difficult, sad relationship? Well, other problems are going to emerge later in the letter.

But the particular cause of pain mentioned here is the behavior of one individual whose behavior, in the words of verse 5, has caused pain. pain. And because this man has caused pain to Paul and to the whole fellowship, Paul, at the end of verse 2, has had to cause him pain by calling him to account and placing him under some kind of discipline.

Now, friends, these things happen in churches. No church is exempt from episodes like that. Somebody misbehaves, sometimes it's a group of people who misbehave, and the leaders have to call them to account and discipline them.

sometimes the miscreant is an elder or the pastor. That also happens. And when it happens, it causes great pain and deep upset to a fellowship.

[ 38 : 55 ] Where things go well, a congregation comes to love its pastor and its elders. And the pastor and the elders come to love the congregation.

Friends, we know something about that in this congregation, don't we? I'm glad to say. But where things go wrong, nettles have to be grasped. But do you see how, in verses six to eight, Paul says, this man who has been disciplined and who presumably has now repented must now be lovingly welcomed back and forgiven and comforted and loved so that he's not overwhelmed by grief.

And Paul goes on to say in verse 11 that if forgiveness and love are not reestablished in a congregation, Satan will win a local and temporary victory. Well, it's time for us to gather our breath and sing the last hymn like linets.

But let me just try and sum up our study tonight in just a very few final words. Churches should be fellowships of love and joy and godly behavior.

We have, I think, very much to be thankful for in this fellowship at present. But friends, we must beware. if any of us cause trouble, and any of us, any of us could, we will cause tears, as the Corinthians did to Paul.

[ 40 : 16 ] Do you see it there in verse 4? Did you notice the tears? Those are real tears, wet tears, sobbings. It really upset Paul. But a church is greatly strengthened if its members and its leaders know that ungodly behavior will be addressed and will be disciplined.

We all need to know that. Paul had to do this for the Corinthians if love and joy and godly behavior were to be reestablished. In his case, there was the additional problem of his authority being undermined.

But it was not only the Corinthians who needed to listen to the Apostle Paul. It's the churches of every generation who need to have the authority of the Apostle Paul reestablished in their midst.

Let us pray together. How we thank you, dear Heavenly Father, that Paul did not run away from these difficulties and this complex and strained and painful relationship with the Corinthians.

And we do pray that as we work our way through this letter, you will help us to love Paul, to honor him, and to learn from him. And as we see him having to discipline this church for its good and for its ultimate joy, we do pray that you will help us too to drink in deeply this understanding that discipline is something that all of us are under in the right way.

[ 41 : 51 ] And that if we step out of line and we behave in an ungodly fashion, these things must be addressed. So please bless us through your Apostle, dear Father, and build us up, we pray to the glory of Christ's name.

Amen.