

“It Never Ends”

2 Corinthians 1:1-3

January 26, 2003

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We completed 1 Corinthians last Sunday. We began our study of that great letter last April 4th and thirty-two Sunday morning sermons later we completed it. But the history of Paul and that congregation was by no means completed when he sent off the letter we know as 1 Corinthians by the hand of Titus. There was more to come and Paul’s ministry to that congregation would continue. He would write another great letter that would take its rightful place in Holy Scripture and, after sending that letter, he would visit the congregation and stay with them for a period of three months.

2 Corinthians is the third letter we know about that Paul wrote the church in Corinth. In 1 Cor. 5:9 he makes reference to a letter he wrote to the church before he wrote the letter we know as 1 Corinthians. We know little about that letter, what prompted it, when it was sent. But we know about 1 Corinthians. That letter, which we just finished studying, dealt with a number of serious problems in the church that had been reported to Paul while he was engaged in a lengthy ministry in Ephesus. In that letter Paul took up the divisions that had marred the church’s brotherhood, the party-spirit, the toleration of scandalous behavior in the church – a case of incest, certain men consorting with prostitutes and asserting their Christian right to do so, and brothers taking one another to court. He dealt with the lovelessness of their relationships with one another, particularly as that lovelessness expressed itself in their practice of the Lord’s Supper. He dealt with their disagreement about the eating of meat offered to idols and the participation of some of them in banquets held in pagan temples. He addressed their proud misuse of the remarkable spiritual gifts the Holy Spirit had lavished on the church and confusion about the resurrection of the dead. It must have been a difficult letter to write as it must have been a difficult letter to read. No one likes to be taken to the woodshed and that is what Paul did with these Christians in 1 Corinthians.

We can well imagine that Paul wondered and worried about how his letter would be received. As 1 Corinthians makes plain, there were those in the Corinthian church who had a negative opinion of Paul and it would not have been hard for Paul to believe that his letter would make matters worse.

Apparently, as we learn in 2 Cor. 2:12, Paul had a plan to meet Titus, returning from Corinth with news, at Troas. If you consult your maps at the back of your Bible you will find Troas north of Ephesus, where the Aegean Sea narrows. As the main port of NW Asia Minor, it was the typical crossing point for travelers going to Macedonia, what is now northern Greece.

But Paul didn’t find Titus at Troas. Paul never wasted time. As soon as he had arrived in Troas he began to preach and teach and, as we will read in 2:12, the Lord opened a door for him there. It is an indication of how concerned Paul was about matters in Corinth and how anxious he was to hear Titus’ report, that, though the work was prospering in Troas, he left for Macedonia hoping to meet Titus there. And, sure enough, he did finally catch up with his young assistant, perhaps at Philippi or, Neapolis, Philippi’s port.

"The news that Titus brought from Corinth was reassuring, but not entirely so." [Hughes, xvii] As we will read in 7:7-16, Titus reported that the Corinthians had received him well and had received the letter well, that they were longing to see Paul, that they were genuinely sorry for their sins and were furiously repenting of them. By all of this Paul was, of course, immensely relieved and encouraged.

However, the news was not all good. There was still a party in the church that refused to submit to Paul's authority and, what is more, in the meantime, some false teachers had arrived on the scene who, in seeking to advance their own claims, were doing their best to discredit Paul. It is this fact that explains the extraordinarily personal character of the letter we know as 2 Corinthians.

It is far and away the most personal of all of Paul's letters. In no other letter do we find so many autobiographical details. The letter is full of references to people, places, and events, only some of which are known to us from other information in the New Testament. The reason for this is, in large part, that Paul is defending himself and his ministry in this letter. His character and his credentials as an apostle were under attack in Corinth and so Paul rose to his own defense.

The accusations took several forms. *First*, the false teachers were accusing Paul of being personally unreliable and undependable. And the argument they were using, according to Titus' report, was that Paul had promised a visit to Corinth and then had not made it. In other words, his word couldn't be trusted.

Taking 1:15-16 and 2:1 together, it appears that this is what happened. At the end of 1 Corinthians, as we read last week, Paul had proposed a visit to Corinth after a swing through Macedonia, visiting churches there and collecting the money that those congregations were contributing to the offering for the poor in Jerusalem. That, apparently, was a change from the plan he had originally communicated to them, perhaps in that first letter mentioned in 1 Cor. 5:9. In that original plan, Paul was to pay two visits to Corinth. He would cross the Aegean and visit them, then go north to Macedonia, and, then, on his way back to Jerusalem with the offering, would pay another visit to Corinth. That had been his plan and he had communicated that plan to the church.

However, as it happened, that plan was changed and he now proposed, as we read in 1 Corinthians 16:7-8, rather than two brief visits, to make one longer visit, some three months in fact, as it turned out. We learn that from Acts 20:3.

You know how people are, especially people who are interested in tearing other people down, in ruining their reputation. They seize on innocent and harmless things and make issues of them. Plans change; everyone knows that. No right thinking person would have assumed that when Paul told them of his plan to visit soon and twice he was inflexibly committed to that schedule, come wind, come weather. Surely reasonable people would understand that circumstances might very well require an alteration of plans. But the false teachers needed an issue and this change of itinerary was the best they could find.

And so, on the basis of this change in his plans, they charged him, as we read in 1:17, with “lightness.” “They called him a weathercock, a yes and no man, who said now one thing, and now the opposite, who said both at once and with equal emphasis, who had his own interests in view in his fickleness, and whose word, to speak plainly, could never be depended upon.” [James Denney]

To all of this Paul will reply that the alteration of his plan was due, not to fickleness on his part, but to a desire not to come to Corinth when his visit was bound to be painful. Rather he wanted his letter to do its work and come to them afterwards.

Further, Titus told Paul that the false teachers were making a point of the fact that Paul had not come to Corinth with “letters of recommendation.” Paul, of course, had written in recommendation of Timothy to the Corinthians, and often did this in his letters. But, as he will argue in chapter 3, while the false teachers were completely dependent upon such letters for “the successful marketing of their merchandise in spiritual things,” there was something faintly ludicrous in the notion that the Apostle Paul would require letters to authenticate his authority as an apostle of Christ. His long ministry in Corinth had brought the members of the church to faith in Christ in the first place and, what is more, had been accompanied by powerful signs and wonders, [Hughes, 85-86]

These and other aspersions on his ministry as an Apostle Paul answers with an account of how faithfully he has discharged his ministry, in Corinth and in many other places, with what blessing from God, and how much he has endured for the sake of the gospel.

It is possible that it was this dissident group, under the influence of the false teachers who wanted to undermine Paul’s authority, so as to increase their own, who were responsible for slowing up the collections in Corinth for the offering Paul was gathering for the poor in Jerusalem. He will speak directly to that matter in chapters 8-9. And the final four chapters are taken up with the exposing of these false teachers and answering the insinuations they had spread about Paul’s character and motives.

The result is a very personal letter in which we learn a great deal about Paul himself, as well as hear him bring to bear gospel truth against real life problems that are, alas, all too common in the life of the church. And, along the way we will be treated to some fabulously important statements of both theological and ethical truth. It won’t take us so long to make our way through 2 Corinthians as it did 1 Corinthians because Paul takes up fewer subjects, but some of the material in this great letter is as wonderfully memorable and helpful and illuminating as any in the Bible.

Now, I want to begin by noting the point that is made by the very existence of this second letter, which is really Paul’s third letter, but the second canonical or biblical letter.

Think about it. Paul had spent an amazing 18 months or more establishing the Corinthian church. Many had been saved, had come to the knowledge of God and Jesus Christ, and had witnessed divine power unleashed in breathtaking ways. Then, sometime later, while Paul was faithfully prosecuting a similar church-planting ministry in Ephesus, word reached him of many

problems in the new church in Corinth. Almost as soon as he left, apparently, believers began harping at one another, openly indulging sins that even made pagans blush, and dallying with views that were no part of the gospel they had been taught. How discouraging it must have been for the Apostle Paul, to see a work begun so well so quickly begin to unravel. He dispatched a letter to set the believers straight, and, gratefully, in many respects the letter did its intended work.

But now there are new problems. False teachers have arrived and have found a receptive ear among some of the Christians in Corinth. Now Paul has to write *another* letter, dealing with *another* set of problems.

It never stops! If it isn't one thing, it's another. If it isn't bad theology it's bad ethics. If it isn't bad ethics, it's petty jealousies and empire-building. Here are a group of believers prepared, apparently quite readily prepared, to believe the worst about a man who had brought them the gospel of Christ and the hope of eternal life, whose ministry had been accompanied by miracles – which certainly wasn't the case with these new teachers who had arrived in Corinth! We could well imagine Paul throwing up his hands and saying, "Well, if they are stupid enough to swallow what those charlatans are dishing out, then I can't help them any more; they deserve what they will get." But, instead, Paul writes another long, magnificent letter, and then follows up the letter with three months spent at Corinth putting everything right once again.

John Bunyan, in a stroke of genius, I think, reflects the reality of Paul's ministry in *Pilgrim's Progress* when he has Evangelist appear not once, not twice, but three times at critical junctures in Christian's life. It is Evangelist – Bunyan's picture of the Bedford pastor John Gifford – who brings the news of salvation to Pilgrim and firsts sets him on the road from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City. But later, when Christian was sidetracked by the advice of Worldly Wiseman and wandered from the gospel way, it was the same Evangelist who found him and got him back on the right path. And, then, much later in his pilgrimage, Evangelist meets Christian once more and prepares him for the temptations that he will face in the city of Vanity Fair. Is that not a picture of Paul's ministry to the Corinthians. He starts them off on the right way to heaven, he gets them back on the way when they wander from it, and, later, once again, he helps them get their spiritual feet under themselves once more.

I find in this history of Paul's dealings with the church in Corinth a parable of the Christian life. This point is confirmed everywhere in Paul's ministry, but you also see it everywhere in the Bible's teaching about the Christian life. And the point is this: *It never stops!* The problems just keep coming.

Whether we are talking about Christian individuals or congregations, there is this constant round of difficulty. Individual Christians face it with regard to their own hearts and lives as Christians: long into their pilgrimage they are still sinning, still embarrassing themselves, still creating problems with others, still struggling with temptations that one would have thought should have long ago been put to rest.

Christian parents face it with their children. Lessons are only very slowly learned and each stage of life brings its own new problems and, sometimes, debacles.

And churches face the same reality. Individual congregations do and so do larger churches. Sometimes the problems are theological as they were in Galatia and Corinth and other NT churches. Either ancient heresies or new theories begin to worm their way into the mind of the church and, here we go again, fighting for the faith once and for all delivered to the saints. But sometimes the problems are not theological at all. They are divisions that are entirely personal in nature, fueled by petty jealousies and real or imagined slights.

If I told you all that I might tell you of the internal problems that have beset churches in our town through the years, or if I told you all I might of churches of our own presbytery that were destroyed by problems of these kinds, I would send you from this sanctuary well and truly discouraged. But I wouldn't have told you anything that wasn't true. I wouldn't even have told you anything that wasn't quite ordinary and typical of the life of the church in the world.

Paul's dealings with Corinth are the way of it in this world. One thing after another. One problem, one setback, one challenge to be met after another. Paul was in Ephesus when he wrote 1 Corinthians. It wasn't as if he didn't have enough to do. His life was being threatened. The Jews were after him, so were the pagans. The church was being built up day by day. And now comes word that the situation in Corinth is disintegrating and Paul must devote attention to that far-away situation while still trying to keep the pressure up in his ministry in Ephesus. Paul with several balls in the air at the same time: there is a NT picture of Christian ministry and Christian living.

I have been reading a book recently on the evangelical response to the Oxford Movement, the Romanizing movement in the Church of England after the 1830s. What strikes me as so interesting about the book is that the arguments that were bandied back and forth in those days in the middle of the 19th century have surfaced again in our own day. Once again there is in American evangelical Protestant Christianity a significant movement toward Rome. The books that were published in the 1830s and 40s could be published again today for the arguments are very much the same. And, I'm sure that if the Lord tarries, 200 years from now, or 150, those same books could be published a third time because the same challenge will surface again.

And so it is with any number of doctrinal issues. Who would have thought, even 20 years ago, that there would be, at the beginning of the 21st century, a visible movement in English speaking *evangelical* Protestant Christianity minimizing the Reformation, decrying Luther's doctrine of justification by faith, and arguing that, really, Jesus and the Pharisees and Paul and the Judaizers were closer in viewpoint than we have thought. But there *is* such a movement.

We may have thought that some things have been decided for good, but it is not so. There is not a doctrine in the teaching of Christianity that will not have to be defended over and over again. We now are faced with the task of defending, *even against so-called Bible-believers and evangelicals*, the doctrines of God's wrath (upon which so much rests in the gospel of Jesus Christ), of God's transcendence and foreknowledge and sovereignty, and the ethics of sexual purity and sex differentiation. Some of those same doctrines had to be defended, within the evangelical church, only two generations ago, and now they are under attack again and from within the church.

And what is true of the church in its larger life, is true of the individual congregation. I tell you, there is always something stirring the pot. Always. When I have a few days of apparent peace and tranquility, I catch myself wondering when the phone will ring and wondering what the next problem will be. I don't at all mean to suggest that there isn't wonderful joy and blessing also. There surely is. There was in Ephesus and there was in Corinth and Paul says so. I'm only acknowledging the obvious. "Man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward," and that is a rule that applies as well in the kingdom of God.

But, as I said, it isn't only the church in its corporate life that seems never to get past the problems. That is true because it is also true of the individual believing life. Is it not so with you, my brothers and sisters, that in a very real way you lurch from problem to problem in your life. Again, the Lord brings much blessing too, and fills our hearts with joy again and again, but our Christian life is like Paul's relationship with the Corinthians: it never ends, one problem follows another.

I think, myself, that there is something very important here, something of immense practical importance for us all. Why is it, after all, that it is so widely the experience of Christians that they are not as zealous years into their Christian life as they were when they were younger believers? Why is it that the edge that was on them before has now been smoothed out? Think about your life as a Christian: think about how you attacked your sins at one time, about how it was that you were always thinking about taking new ground, about how you would launch away in some new service of the Lord. Perhaps you have grown wiser in many ways, but it is the confession of untold numbers of serious Christians that they struggle to keep up the zeal they had before, to be as determined to keep going in the Christian life as once they were. Remember how you used to attack your besetting sins and what steps you took and what vows you made and what energy you devoted to seeing them obliterated from your life. But perhaps it has been some time since you took on your sins that way, with that determination and with that energy. Why is that? Why is it that, as many Christian authorities have observed, there are very few Christians and, for that matter, very few Christian ministers who keep up to the end the zeal that was in their spirit at the first. [Andrew Bonar: *Diary and Letters*, 349]

Well, in my view, the largest reason is that Christians grow weary. They become discouraged over the prospect of fundamental change. One problem has followed another, one failure another, one difficulty another, and, as it were, *they get tired of writing letters to Corinth*. They don't seem to do any good. If they ever solved one problem another popped up. If they addressed that one, still another would appear. And, in spiritual weariness, they come to accept the *status quo* instead of pressing on for higher and holier things. Am I describing you? I am certainly describing myself!

And what is the message of this great letter and the history from which it sprung? It is that there can be no giving up, no accepting of the *status quo*. If another letter is needed, another must be sent. If a visit is required it must be made, however inconvenient. If false rumors and innuendoes are circulating, the truth must be spoken. If false ideas are being spread, they must be contradicted. If evil behavior is being tolerated, it must be addressed and new obedience summoned up even if for the umpteenth time.

There can be no slacking in this fight, within each of us or within all of us together. The problems and the challenges will come one right after another. Let us squarely face the fact. They did for our Savior also. He never enjoyed a long period of ease and uninterrupted success and neither will we his followers. If one enemy left him, another soon took his place. If one difficulty was surmounted, he found two more in his path. If so it was for the master, why should the servants suppose that theirs will be a different life. It is our honor and dignity to do the Lord's work and to walk in his steps.

Historians tell us that one of the reasons for Napoleon's remarkable military success was the ability and fighting spirit of his marshals, his senior commanders. Napoleon knew how much he owed to these men and made them fabulously wealthy in return. Virtually all of these men were brave men who had themselves fought with honor and distinguished themselves in battle. They were the furthest thing from armchair soldiers. One of them was the much-wounded François-Joseph Lefebvre, a man who had come up through the ranks; he had once been a lowly sergeant and had advanced through the ranks, eventually he had become a marshal because he distinguished himself in battle after battle. He was once asked to justify Napoleon's generosity to his marshals. He replied, "We will go down into my garden. I shall fire at you sixty times and, if you are still alive at the end, everything I have shall be yours." [Paul Johnson, *Napoleon*, 112]

Well if a man like Napoleon knew the value of a brave and loyal soldier, how much more the Lord Christ himself. If Napoleon would so reward faithfulness to him in the teeth of great difficulty, how much more the Savior of your souls. Oh, yes, it never ends, the difficulty of this life, it never ends...until it ends forever and then there is the crown of righteousness for those who fought the good fight!