

2 Corinthians 2:1-4

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/2cor/2cor-2/2-corinthians-21-4/>

Paul explains why he did not come to Corinth as previously planned. He believed his visit would bring pain to both himself and the Corinthians. He has the Corinthians' best interest at heart, and is seeking to aid their spiritual growth by writing to them.

In the previous section, Paul said that his decision to cancel his planned return to Corinth was to “spare you,” meaning sparing the Corinthian believers from coming to them *in sorrow again* (2 Corinthians 1:23). Paul begins Chapter 2 asserting that this was for himself as well, saying *But I determined this for my own sake, that I would not come to you in sorrow again* (v 1).

Thus, it was not only to spare the Corinthian believers from *sorrow* that Paul decided to cancel his plan to visit them, but also *for his own sake* that he would *not come to them in sorrow again*. Paul's intent was to spare both himself as well as the Corinthians from *sorrow* which they would each experience were he to have fulfilled his intended visit.

Paul had apparently intended to pay two return visits. He had intended to pay a visit to Corinth while going to Macedonia, and then on the return journey from Macedonia to Judea he wanted to visit Corinth once more (2 Corinthians 1:15-16).

Later in this letter, we find that Paul is preparing to visit Corinth on his way to Judea, and asks the Corinthians to prepare a financial gift for the benefit of the suffering Jewish believers there (2 Corinthians 9:3-5). This proposed visit referenced later in the letter would be the third time he had gone to Corinth (2 Corinthians 13:1). That means he had already journeyed to Corinth twice at the time this letter was penned.

We have a record of Paul's first visit to Corinth in Acts 18, but apparently there was a second visit that we do not have recorded, since Paul says in 2 Corinthians 13:1 that the visit

contemplated in this letter will be his third visit. That means that when 2 Corinthians was written, Paul had already visited them twice. Our only information about this second, unrecorded visit comes from passing references in 2 Corinthians. One such inference is that his second visit to them included a great deal of *sorrow*.

We are not given explicit details of what happened, why, and how. It seems apparent from his references that the Corinthians and Paul were fully aware of what took place during that visit, and that the visit produced *sorrow*. Paul had no desire to repeat this *sorrow again*, so he wanted to spare both the church as well as himself of what had been a mutually unpleasant experience.

One of the prime functions of Paul's apostolic ministry was to promote mutual joy (2 Corinthians 1:24, 2:3). He did not want to return to Corinth and have another experience of *sorrow*, so he says *For if I cause you sorrow, who then makes me glad but the one whom I made sorrowful* (v 2).

This statement indicates that Paul concluded it would be unproductive to have another round of "I make you sorrowful and you in return will be unable to lift my spirits as a result"—therefore it seemed better to him to avoid coming. Paul had *sorrow* enough, having endured great difficulties. He mentions these in Chapter 1 (2 Corinthians 1:5, 8-9), but will go into detail about them later in the letter. We see there that the pain he endured for the sake of the gospel was indeed immense (2 Corinthians 11:23-28).

We can infer that if he had to come to Corinth he would likely face a situation where he would have to bring discipline upon the body of believers, and that would be painful for both him and the church in Corinth. His joy was to see the continual development of the church and the ministry of reconciliation that was taking place in and through the church at Corinth.

His statement to them is if he caused *sorrow*, then where would be the joy for him and the church? *This is the very thing I wrote you, so that when I came, I would not have sorrow from those who ought to make me rejoice* (v 3).

Paul implies that he should have had the opportunity to visit Corinth in order to *rejoice* that his children in the faith were making great progress. Instead, he declined to visit them, presumably due to their lack of progress in becoming disciples. Any believer can be quite encouraged that in spite of their failings, Paul still refers to the believers in Corinth as “saints” making up the “church of God” as well as referring to them as “brethren” (2 Corinthians 1:1, 8:1).

This underscores the reality that our acceptance into God’s family as His child is freely given apart from our deeds or actions. Being born again is simply a matter of belief in Jesus (John 3:14-16). For more on being accepted into God’s family through faith, read our article: [“What is Eternal Life? How to Gain the Gift of Eternal Life.”](#)

At the end of this letter, Paul will exhort the believers in Corinth to examine themselves to see if they are walking in faith (2 Corinthians 13:5).

Rather than come to visit and discipline them, Paul exhorts the Corinthians to look within themselves and submit to the Holy Spirit’s discipline. There is no question raised as to their belonging to God; they are fully accepted in Christ. The question is whether they are walking in the life they have been given. Paul’s letters emphasize the reality that believers can choose to walk in death, even though they have been delivered from death and slavery to sin (Romans 6:12, 16).

Paul’s desire is that his children in the faith have the spiritual peace and joy that comes from a faithful walk in the Lord. Paul is opening his heart to the church and sharing with them his deep love and concern for them and their ministry. Paul writes that when he made his plan to come to visit them, he formerly had *confidence in you all that my joy would be the joy of you all* (v 3).

Paul's point seems to be that he made his plan to come visit Corinth for a third time in order to bring them *joy*. Therefore, when it became apparent that his visit would instead be a source of *sorrow*, he cancelled the trip. This apparently created controversy in Corinth, providing ammunition for Paul's detractors. Paul here appears to explain his reasoning for cancelling his planned visit because the purpose for the visit (to bring *joy* to them *all*) was no longer achievable.

Joy as it used here and throughout the New Testament comes from the Greek word "chara." Though it is translated as "joy," it goes deeper than the western cultural context of joy, which is rooted in temporal emotions. In our current Webster's dictionary, "joy" is defined as "the emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune or by the prospect of possessing what one desires: DELIGHT."

Joy to Paul and the followers of Christ was more than an emotion. It was rather the abundant life that transcends circumstances and emotions. Paul writes to the churches in Galatia that "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self control" (Galatians 5:22-23). So, the "love," "joy," and "peace" that Paul describes goes well beyond an emotion. This comes from walking in faithful obedience to Christ, following His Spirit.

Paul asserts that *joy* comes from the Spirit of Christ. As a fruit, *joy* is equipping us for the work of ministering productively within the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12). So, *joy* can persist even through suffering as we present ourselves to Christ for the work of the ministry and service to Christ (Romans 12:1).

When Paul says *my joy would be the joy of you all*, he is expressing that *joy* comes as he sees the will of God being fulfilled in the church at Corinth and in him. This again would infer that Paul's

decision not to visit Corinth had to do with their lack of spiritual progress in walking faithfully in Christ.

This reminds us of Jesus when He says to His disciples in John 15:10-11:

“If you keep my commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in His love. These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in You, and that your joy may be made full.”

For Jesus and Paul, *joy* comes when the will of God is being accomplished. So biblical *joy* is a human fulfillment that has deep spiritual roots that endure difficulty and disappointment. This was Paul’s reality, as he says: *For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you with many tears* (v 4).

The letter *I wrote to you* that Paul refers to here was likely one written between what we call 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians. We have no record of this letter or what it said. We have only the few references that Paul makes in this letter; *I wrote to you with many tears*. If we examine all the written works by Paul in the New Testament—the Pauline corpus—this is an extraordinary statement.

It seems that this letter he refers to was sent in place of the visit to Corinth he had originally planned. With *anguish* and *affliction of heart*, and with *many tears* Paul wrote, but he wanted them to know the true motive of his letter: *Not that you would be made sorrowful* (v 4). Even though the letter was *sorrowful*, that was not the purpose or motivation for his writing. Paul did not write for the purpose of hurting their feelings, although they were in fact made sorrowful. That was a by-product. Paul’s reason for writing them a tearful letter was instead *that you might know the love which I have especially for you* (v 4).

This implies that real love shares truth. Giving someone corrective wisdom is giving them love. Jesus refers to corrective wisdom as being “holy” and as valuable as “pearls” in His Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:6). Jesus instructs His disciples not to waste the valuable and precious words of corrective wisdom upon those disinterested in hearing them.

Biblical Text

¹ But I determined this for my own sake, that I would not come to you in sorrow again. ² For if I cause you sorrow, who then makes me glad but the one whom I made sorrowful? ³ This is the very thing I wrote you, 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. ⁴ 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.