

“Behold This Is The Third Time ...”

“... I am ready to come to you and I will not be a burden to you for I seek not yours, but you: for the children ought not to lay up for the parents, but the parents for the children. And I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls. If I love you more abundantly, am I loved the less? But be it so, I did not myself burden you; but being crafty, I caught you with guile. Did I take advantage of you by any one of them whom I sent unto you? I exhorted Titus, and I sent the brother with him. Did Titus take any advantage of you? Walked we not in the same spirit? Walked we not in the same steps?” (2 Cor. 12:14-18).

A “centuries old” disagreement exists among scholars as what Paul means by “This is the third time I am coming to you.” Some argue Paul had made a second visit between the first and second epistle and they think that he is saying this is his third time to visit them. It is certain that Luke records no such visit in Acts but that does not necessarily mean he did not make one. Luke mentions nothing of Paul’s visit to Arabia after his conversion in Acts 9, but Paul expressly says that trip was made (Gal. 1:17). However, both Luke and Paul say he went from Damascus to Jerusalem for while Paul states he went from Damascus to Arabia, he also states that he returned from Arabia to Damascus (Gal. 2:17).

It seems to me that the command of Paul to the Corinthians they withdraw from the man who had taken his father’s wife (1 Cor. 5:1-13), are the stimulus for their obedience to the apostle’s command in 2 Cor. 2:5-8 and 2 Cor. 7:12 and are the obvious “follow-up” to his first letter, making it very difficult to “sandwich” a second trip to Corinth in between the first and first letter. On the other hand it is not difficult to understand that when he says, “This is the third time I am ready to come to you” (12:14), he only means this is the third time he has made plans to come to them. The fact that critics in Corinth faulted him by saying he didn’t do what he said he would do to which he responded that — in essence — we cannot leave God out of the plans we make, certainly indicate he planned an earlier trip which had some how been aborted (2 Cor. 1:15-19). There seem to be too much connection between the first and second letter to allow Paul to have some how made a trip to Corinth between the two. As earlier indicated, the adulterous brother and Paul’s instructions to the Corinthians as to how they were to treat him in view of the fact he had repented; his instructions about the contribution for the Jerusalem saints with the follow-up of further instructions for that contribution in his second letter (1 Cor. 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians 8-9). Then there is Paul’s joy in the first chapter of this second letter which evidences, yes, joy that he had found Titus “safe and sound” but equally important the joy the overall good news Titus brought him of the Corinthians’ reaction to his first letter: “What earnest care it wrought in you, what clearing ... in everything ye approved yourselves to be pure in this matter” (2 Cor. 7:11f).

Verse 14 shows that verse 13 is sarcasm when Paul asked if he had wronged the Corinthians by not accepting aid from them to which he responded, “Forgive me this wrong” (2 Cor. 12:13). Verse 14 says, “I will not be a burden to you for I seek not yours, but you.” He adds, “The children ought not to lay up for the parents, but the parents for

the children.” Again Paul displays the parental feelings he had for the Corinthians — he was their spiritual father. In his first letter he had written, “For though ye have ten thousand tutors in Christ, yet have ye not many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I begat you through the gospel” (1 Cor. 4:15). Paul knew full well there might come a time when children do “lay up” for a parent. Ephesian children were commanded to “Honor thy father and thy mother ...” (Eph. 6:1). It was by this command that Jesus showed the Pharisees they had broken the law of God by their traditions. The Pharisees set this command aside by saying to aged, needy parents, “That wherewith thou mightiest have been profited by me is given to God ... and ye have made void the word of God by your traditions” (Mt. 15:5f).

And so Paul asks them how he or any others who came from him had wronged them. He was confident that the Corinthians would have to acknowledge that Titus and any brother who came with him had walked with the same attitude (spirit) and same practice (steps) as he.

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