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Session 18 - 2 Corinthians, Galatians

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Have you ever gotten one of those emails? You know the ones, so urgent, so passionate, that you can practically feel the sender's emotion burning through the screen. Well today, we're opening up a couple of pieces of mail from the very early church, and let me tell you, these aren't some stuffy, abstract theological documents. They are intense, deeply personal letters written by the Apostle Paul right in the middle of a huge fight.

So let's unroll these ancient scrolls and see what all the fuss was about. Because at the heart of both of these letters is this exact question. Just imagine for a second, you've built something from nothing, you've poured your life into it, and then some rivals show up and try to tear it all down.

And they're not just attacking your ideas; they're attacking you, your character, your credibility. That's the fire Paul found himself in. Alright, so here's our game plan for today.

First, we're going to talk about why these letters even exist. Then we'll dive into two totally different crises. One in Corinth, where Paul's leadership is on the ropes, and another in Galatia, where his entire message is being challenged.

We'll look at his frankly brilliant responses, and then we'll wrap it all up with why this ancient drama still speaks volumes to us today. Okay, so the first thing you have to get is that Paul didn't just sit down in a quiet study one day to write down his theology. Not at all.

These letters are reactive. They are real-time responses to urgent problems. He's writing to communities he loves, basically putting out fires that have erupted while he's been away.

The two hotspots we're zoning in on are Corinth, a big, bustling, cosmopolitan port city, and Galatia, which was a whole region in what we'd call modern-day Turkey. Paul had put in the hard yards planting these churches, and now he's getting reports that things are going sideways fast. So let's start in Corinth.

Here, the issue isn't just a friendly disagreement. Oh no. It is a full-on assault on Paul's credibility.

A new group of leaders has rolled into town; Paul sarcastically calls them super-apostles, and they are dead set on convincing everyone that Paul is a fraud. And what's fascinating is the clash of values you see here. These super-apostles were flashy.

They were all about impressive speeches, big credentials, and projecting power. You know, the kind of stuff that played really well in that culture. They looked the part.

And then you have Paul, who, by his own admission, wasn't a slick speaker. So his opponents just used that against him, saying, see, he doesn't have what it takes. I mean, their argument was pretty simple and honestly pretty brutal.

It was basically, look at Paul's track record. He gets beaten. He's persecuted.

He suffers. A real man of God would be successful and powerful, not weak and pathetic. They were literally using his scars as evidence against him.

So how does Paul hit back? Does he try to one-up them with a better resume? Work on his public speaking? Nope. He does something nobody saw coming. He completely flips the script on what power and authority even mean.

And this is the absolute core of his defense. It's brilliant. He takes their main accusation- his weakness and suffering- and he turns it into his number one credential.

He says, "You think my suffering is a sign of failure? Actually, it's the ultimate proof that I'm legit. Why? Because when he is weak, there's no way anyone can mistake the power at work for his own. It has to be God's.

And this quote just nails it. He says God's power is actually perfected in weakness. So he concludes, hey, I'm going to brag about my weaknesses because that's the very place where God's strength shows up most powerfully in my life.

It's such a radical, upside-down way of thinking about strength. Okay, let's pack our bags and head over to Galatia. Because if the problem in Corinth was about the messenger, the problem in Galatia was about the message itself.

And for Paul, this was way, way more dangerous. This was a threat that struck at the very heart of his entire gospel. So here's what happened.

Another group of teachers, often called Judaizers, showed up in the Galatian churches and their message sounded kind of reasonable at first. They said, hey, it's great that you Gentiles have faith in Jesus, but that's just step one. To really be in, to be full members of God's people, you also have to follow the Jewish law.

This table just lays it out perfectly. The Judaizers had a faith-plus equation. Faith plus obeying the law is what makes you right with God.

But for Paul, this was a complete betrayal of the gospel. His formula was radically simple. Faith in Jesus alone makes you right with God, period.

Any obedience that follows comes later as a result, powered by God's Spirit, not as a requirement to get in. Paul's reaction to this so-called different gospel, it is not calm. It is not measured.

It is without a doubt one of the most fiery, emotional, and frankly, angry things we have from him. You can feel the sense of shock and betrayal just leaping off the page. And here's a little detail that shows you just how upset he is.

Almost every single ancient letter and all of Paul's other letters start with a nice little thanksgiving to God. It's like the standard polite opening, but not in Galatians. He is so floored that he just skips the pleasantries entirely and goes straight for the throat.

He doesn't even warm up. Right after the greeting, his first words are, I am astonished. Can you just feel that? The disbelief, the hurt.

He's saying, how could you, how could you abandon the truth I gave you this quickly? For Paul, the stakes could not possibly be higher. And then you get to the very end of the letter. It's like he literally grabs the pen from his scribe because he has one last thing to say, and he needs them to feel it.

He writes, "Look at the big letters I'm using to write this myself. This is the ancient world's version of typing in all caps and hitting send with three exclamation points. It's a final, desperate plea for them to wake up.

So after all that, after opening this 2000 year old mail and feeling all that raw emotion, what's the big takeaway? Why do these very specific crisis-driven letters from the past still matter so much? Well, a few things really stand out. First, these letters are proof that our deepest beliefs are almost always hammered out in the heat of conflict, not in a quiet library. Second, they give us two powerful, timeless ideas.

From Second Corinthians, we get this radical challenge to our ideas of success. This notion is that true strength is found in vulnerability. And from Galatians, we get this fierce, passionate defense of salvation by faith alone, an idea that would literally change the course of world history.

But maybe the biggest thing is this: these letters show us the messy human emotional reality behind the start of a global faith. This wasn't clean and tidy. It was a fight.

And that really just leaves us with one final thought, doesn't it? Paul's most fundamental beliefs were put to the test, and he fought for them with every ounce of his being. It just makes you wonder: how do the conflicts in our own lives shape what we believe? And if our deepest convictions were on the line, how far would we really be willing to go to defend?