

AUGUST STUDY

# Say Uncle



Cry *uncle*. What mental picture does that phrase suggest? A taunt from an unwanted challenger? A bully who twisted an arm or pinched some skin? A chant from arm wrestling onlookers? Crying uncle means we're ready to quit. We've reached our limits. We're done. We acknowledge our weakness and admit defeat. And on that declaration hinges an unspoken hope for release.

Reality is, the blessed life we aspire to as believers involves trials and challenges. The heart of the Gospel is a cross. The Apostle Paul spoke frequently of both joy and suffering. His writings offer hope and encouragement for our wrestling. How did Paul silence the uncle? How did he move from "pressed out of measure, above strength, inasmuch that we despaired even of life" to "thanks be to God who always causeth us to triumph in Christ"? The Book of 2 Corinthians provides an overview of Paul's struggles and his pathway to victory, a victory that can also be ours for silencing the uncle in our spirits and giving us strength to endure.



The influence of your *uncle* truly is a

relative thing. Earthly family can play a major role in how you face difficulties. Medical and mental health professionals recognize that childhood events greatly determine resiliency. ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences) tend to lower ability to rebound or endure. Personality bent plays into resiliency. A "strong-willed child" may possess greater reserves. Spiritual family also factors into holding power. Do you maintain a close relationship with your Father? Do you have supportive Christian brothers and sisters?

How long have you lived as a member of God's family? Healthy family connectedness increases strength and fuels our joy.

***Where's Your Uncle?***

On a scale of 1-10, rate your resiliency.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Would you rate your personality bent as strong-willed, compliant, or complaining?

On a scale of 1-10, rate your spiritual family connectedness

With God

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

With Christian brothers and sisters

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

## Encountering the Uncles

### The Uncle of Past

Little is written about Paul's early life. Considering the opportunities he was given as a young "rabbi" at the feet of Gamaliel, his childhood may have been idyllic. However, his early adulthood yielded plenty of fodder for the uncle of past. Imagine how uncomfortable Paul must have felt during his initial introduction to the early church, knowing that believers everywhere were talking about his past and expressing skepticism about his testimony. Paul's writings give indications that his past held potential to haunt him. Imprisoned in Rome, did the uncle of past echo reminders of Agabus' prophetic warning against going to Jerusalem or Agrippa's declaration that he would have been free had he not appealed unto Caesar?

*Read 2 Corinthians 11:30-33. Why do you suppose Paul mentioned this incident in relation to his weakness? Do any former defeats or decisions activate your uncle of past?*

### The Uncle of Perception

Perception proved a major problem in Corinth. Paul was perceived as weak. He was demoted in the eyes of the Corinthians who began to exalt and follow some "super apostles." On the flip side, Paul could have definitely put on the pride. Were his impressive credentials a source of inner conflict? Did these boasts of others hit a familiar nerve and incite an area of sensitivity?

*Read 2 Corinthians 10:12-16. Which is more an issue for you—people pleasing, comparison, or pride? Does the thought of measuring up to self-expectations or the expectations of others threaten your joy and endurance? Is perception your uncle?*

## **The Uncle of Pain**

Finding perspective and purpose in pain can be difficult. Physical pain can chip away at our endurance, cause to question our faith, and consume our very being. A read through of 2 Corinthians 11:23-27 reveals that physical pain was a frequent traveling companion for Paul. In addition, Paul suffered plenty of emotional hurt.

*In 2 Corinthians 2:1-4, we sense the depths of his anguish. Read these two passages and list any descriptive words or phrases that come to mind. Has the uncle of pain ever knocked on your door or threatened to take you down? Are you there now? How do you respond?*

## **The Uncle of Preoccupation**

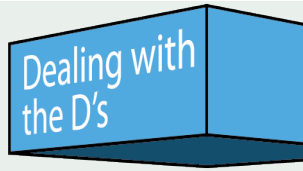
Oswald Chambers wrote, "Spiritual exhaustion is never the result of sin, but of service" (*My Utmost for His Highest*, February 9). Although exhaustion may not result from sin, our approach toward it may result in sin. Are you prone to worry? What preoccupies your thoughts when you are tired? Paul's proverbial plate was piled high with travel itinerary, tent-making toil, and teaching opportunities. Second Corinthians 2:12-13 and 11:28 offer insight into Paul's struggles with preoccupation. Yet he did "not lose heart."

*Has the enemy enlisted the uncle of preoccupation in his attack plan upon you?*

*Read 2 Corinthians 10:3-6. How is taking every thought captive an effective defense strategy for this uncle?*

## Identify Your Uncle

*With which one of these uncles do you most identify? Does your uncle have a different name? If so, write it below.*



Uncle cries rarely happen randomly. Uncles typically follow a distinct pattern that begins with doubt. Doubt fuels discouragement. Discouragement brings disillusionment. Disillusionment leads to despair. Despair yields defeat. Although Paul experienced doubt, discouragement, disillusionment, and even despair, defeat was not his destination.

**DOUBT:** Paul countered doubt with declaration (2 Timothy 1:12). So can we. Find and speak a declaration of truth (relevant Scripture for your situation).

**DISCOURAGEMENT:** Paul countered discouragement by enumerating blessings and investing in others' lives (Philippians 1:3; Ephesians 1:3; 2 Timothy 2:2; 4:11). Count your many blessings; include people God has used to bless your life. Prayerfully consider spiritual mentoring as investment.

**DISILLUSIONMENT:** Paul countered disillusionment with affirmations and factual realities (Philippians 3:13; 2 Timothy 4:7; 2 Corinthians 1:7-9). Trace God's hand in your life. Revisit the things you know are certain about yourself, your faith, and God's work.

**DESPAIR:** Paul countered despair with encouragement and hope (1 Thessalonians 3:7; Philippians 1:20; 2 Timothy 4:17, Romans 15:4). Speak encouragement into the lives of others; allow God to strengthen and encourage as you hold on to hope. Do a word study of hope in Paul's writings for encouragement.

## **Eight Insights for the Uncles**

From 2 Corinthians, we can glean at least eight tools or insights for silencing uncle cries.

1. Wholesome Renewal (2 Corinthians 4:16; 7:5-6; 6:14—7:1). Paul experienced outward conflicts as well as inward emotional turmoil. He accredited his perseverance to daily inner renewal. As we spend intentional time in the presence of Christ, reading the Word and allowing the Spirit to speak to us, we gain new perspective and strength for holy living. Godly choices make for contented lives.

*"Peace is not the absence  
of trouble; it's the presence of Christ.*

*—Judah Smith*

*"How's Your Soul"*

*(YouVersion.com)*

2. Focused Hope (2 Corinthians 1:10; 4:17; 5:5-6, 11, 14).

Paul's hope of deliverance kept him going in the midst of trials beyond his ability to endure. Fueled by holy awe

of God, the Spirit's promise of Heaven and the compelling love of Christ, he remained hopeful.

Paul recognized that his courage and boldness emerged from this solid hope and from the realization that no matter what befell him on earth, Heaven would be better. He rated his troubles as light in comparison to the eternal weight of glory. Eternal perspective allows us to endure and remain hopeful in seemingly hopeless times.

*"While other worldviews lead us to sit in the midst of life's joys, foreseeing the coming sorrows, Christianity empowers its people to sit in the midst of this world's sorrows, tasting the coming joy."*

*—Tim Keller*

*"Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering, p. 31  
(desiringgod.org)*

3. Effective Grace (2 Corinthians 1:12; 4:15; 6:1-3; 8:9, 12:9). Paul realized the ramifications of grace—grace extended to him and grace extending from him—as he sought to share



the gospel with others. Recognizing this responsibility, he urged the Corinthians not to take God's marvelous and abundant grace for granted. Remaining smug in our own salvation denies others of the unmerited grace we have so freely received. Effective grace means placing no obstacles in other's lives that would hinder their salvation. A mindset of keeping our lives in check—not for the approval of others, but for the salvation of others—opens doors for the gospel and quells the uncle cry. The realization that God has lavished His grace upon us serves to keep us gracious and humbled. Gracious living involves not only humility, but an acceptance of our weaknesses. It's about balancing thorns and third-heaven experiences, believing His grace is sufficient for whatever we face.

4. Intentional Measures (2 Corinthians 1:11-14; 2:17; 10:10-12; 8:18-23). Paul strove to be authentic with the Corinthians. This was the so-called complaint that his adversaries brought against him—that he was one thing in his writings, and another in person. In our world of social media saturation, the need for authenticity remains forefront. Paul sought to live above reproach. He took up an offering by committee. He authenticated his team partners and traveling messengers, and explained changes in his plans to visit the Corinthians. He clarified why he did what he did. Intentional measures on our part keep us accountable, and accountability often keeps us in the race when we feel misunderstood or invalidated and are tempted to concede defeat.
5. Balanced Perspective (2 Corinthians 12:15-16; 7:8-13). How do you respond to criticism? Or how do you react when your words cause others grief? Paul shared that he grieved at having to correct his spiritual children, yet he also realized the value of grief and godly sorrow. Paul also felt the weight of undue criticism. He examined these claims and took them into consideration, but did not let them disparage him.
6. Open Hearts (2 Corinthians 6:11-12; 7:2). Often our tendency when we are down, frustrated, or discouraged is to isolate. Yet Paul shared that he had opened wide his heart to the Corinthians and encouraged them to make room

for us in your hearts. Vulnerability involves risk. Yet, as we share our burdens and open our hearts with others, we find mutual encouragement.

7. Abundant Generosity (2 Corinthians 9:6-7, 11-13). Paul commended the Corinthians for their giving and offered them perspective. Whether it's time or funding, we often abundantly receive as we generously give. Sharing a meal, visiting a shut-in, participating in a special offering can build encouragement and hope as we recognize that the God who provided the resources we give, can abundantly supply all our needs in the same way. Paul described giving as both a priestly ministry and a partnership. Recognizing our calling and realizing the results of our giving can both generate praise to God and fuel our fire to carry on.
8. Restorative Plans (2 Corinthians 2:5-11; 5:19-20, 13:11). Paul's goals included restoration and reconciliation. He saw the role of believers as ambassadors, making appeals and pleas for reconciliation with God among those blinded by the god of this world. Paul's plan also included restoration among believers. In Corinth, this meant reunification with a brother who had sinned and suffered consequences. Paul preached forgiveness, and he entrusted the Corinthians in their determination—whomever they forgave, he would also forgive. Unforgiveness, Paul reminded, is yet another enemy ploy. Paul's final greetings in this letter include admonitions for restitution and unity.

*"The measure of a life, after all, is not its duration, but its donation."*  
—Corrie Ten Boom

How close are you to an *uncle*? Have you already been there? Then use that experience to encourage someone else (2 Corinthians 1:3-7). Are you currently headed down that road? God calls us to live differently. We can follow in Paul's footsteps, choosing the path that draws us closer to a Father rather than an *uncle*. ❧❧

About the Author: Sarah Fletcher, former editor for WNAC and her husband, Keith, live in Johnston City, Illinois, where he pastors Johnston City Free Will Baptist church. Sarah is a licensed professional counselor.