

1 Corinthians Introduction

This morning we are starting a brand new study and it's going to take us to a far-away land in the country of Greece. In fact, it's a city which turns out to be one of the most exciting achievements for the apostle Paul and yet one of the most challenging.

It's exciting because the people who lived in this part of the world during Paul's day could hardly be associated with anything resembling holiness. And as the grace of God touches the lives of these people Paul sees Jesus Christ become a reality in their lives. And yet, because of their former lives and the influence of this region, it would be a challenge for them to put off the old and put on the new to the glory of God.

The city in question is Corinth. And our study will be in the first letter that Paul writes to these Corinthian believers. As we start this study we're going to look at a number of things to help set the stage for what was going on in that day and what made this city unique to the rest of the world at that time.

Corinth is actually an isthmus which is a narrow strip of land connecting central Greece to the Peloponnesus peninsula. It's not a very big land mass but it was very important in that it separated two great bodies of water; the Aegean and the Adriatic seas.

To the north the Adriatic sea extended the entire length of Italy and Greece. But the Adriatic also extends north to where shipping had access to most of central Europe. The Aegean sea is south of Corinth and allowed access for shipping to what we know today as Turkey to the East and then south into the Mediterranean sea allowing shipping to reach Egypt and Israel.

Corinth was a central point connecting Europe with the Near East as it brought goods from all over the world. During Paul's day the Roman Empire used Corinth as a staging area for many of its troops to be able to travel through its empire.

But what really made Corinth so attractive from a commerce standpoint was that it allowed shipping to save time and lives by not having to travel around the treacherous southern end of Greece or Peloponnesus. In fact, sailors in those days had two sayings when they had to make that journey: "Let him who sails round Malea forget his home," and "Let him who sails round Malea first make his will."

No one wanted to make that additional 200 plus mile journey around southern Greece if they didn't have to and this little strip of land where Corinth was located was an ideal solution to that problem. But, it did have one major set-back. Once a ship came to port it couldn't cross that isthmus because there was no canal to get from the Aegean sea to the Adriatic, and vice versa.

And they could almost see across this isthmus because it was only 4 miles wide. What to do? Well, the best solution of course would have been to dig a canal, and in fact, Perisander in the sixth century B.C. came up with the idea, but because the technology at that time didn't make it cost effective, it didn't happen.

So, he did the next best thing. He built a road of stone across the isthmus and gave it the name diolkos, a word which means a movable platform. It was a great idea. They would take the smaller ships and actually bring them out of the water and place them on these platforms with huge rollers and drag them from one end of the isthmus to the other.

The larger ships were not as easily moved and so they would have to unload the cargo, haul it across this road and place it on another ship to continue its journey. But it was still faster and safer to do it this way than to have to sail all the way around the southern part of Greece.

But the idea of digging a canal was still entertained by a number of rulers. 'The Greek King Demetrius and the Roman emperors Julius Ceaser and Gaius Caligula all intended to dig a canal. Nero actually put this plan in action but had to shortly abandon it for a variety of reasons including finances. It wasn't until the late 1800's that a French engineer constructed and completed the Corinthian canal which is still in use today.' (Simon J. Kistemaker)

But the importance of having a central point to where shipping could go is that it brought goods and people from all over the world. Practically every nationality in the known world at that time was represented to some extent in Corinth.

Simon J. Kistemaker in his commentary on 1Corinthians notes that Corinth at the time of Paul's writing was a "Roman colony subject to Roman law. The official language was Latin, even though Greek remained the language of the common people. Roman military and civil officials resided in Corinth together with a multitude of settlers who were ex-soldiers and former slaves.....

..... There were also merchants, craftsmen, artists, philosophers, teachers, and laborers from many countries, customs and religions. It would also create a city of wealth and commerce and in turn make it such a happening place that everyone in the world would want to come there, and they did.

And the city of Corinth accommodated them all. There was entertainment, there was the night life, there was the modern day equivalent of fine dining with every type of cuisine, from Italian to Egyptian and everything in between. But what made this city stand out was not its multi-cultural attraction. It was the immoral and the fleshly indulgence which was the trademark of this city.

In fact, many “Greek and Roman authors in the centuries before the rise of Christianity often referred to Corinth as the city of fornication and prostitution. The Greeks had coined the term (korinthia-zesthai) which literally means “to live a Corinthian life”. (Kistemaker)

This was not meant to be an endearing term. “It was meant to describe the city’s immorality. Corinth had a dozen or more temples, of which the one dedicated to the goddess of love, Aphrodite, was known in antiquity for its immorality.” (Kistemaker)

It’s one thing to have prostitution, but to disguise it as a religion only heightened the sin to where people could actually justify their sin by making it look like they were pleasing the gods in participating in this practice. In fact, one writer points out that there were a thousand prostitutes at the temple of Aphrodite alone.

You wouldn’t need that number unless there was a booming business, and it was a business because you had to pay to be a part of the temple services. Every sailor, every soldier, every construction worker together with the more refined trades participated and no one seemed to mind that they were labeled throughout the world as (korinthia-zesthai).

But Corinth was also distinguished as a place where athletes from around the world competed every two years. In fact, the games in Corinth, which were known as the Isthmian games, were second only to the Olympic games. This is very likely why Paul uses the imagery of an athletic contest to encourage the saints in Corinth.

1CO 9:24-26 “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize.

Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air.”

This is what Paul had to contend with when he first came to Corinth. And this area was one of the largest populations in the world. Some have estimated that during this time there were a half a million people living in the area of Corinth and its surrounding port cities. In contrast, today in the city of Corinth, the population is around 30,000 people.

This was a happening place. And this was the kind of place where a little Jewish guy on fire for the Lord was going to invade this city with the greatest news they had ever heard. But it would be no easy task. And the enemy would see to it that the apostle Paul would find opposition and hardship from the beginning.

But, as we'll see, this will not deter Paul from going forth with his mission to serve Christ and the people of Corinth with the gospel of Jesus Christ. But before we start this letter to the Corinthian Church it would make sense to go back and discover how that church was started in the first place and why this letter was needed at all.

As a point of reference it was on Paul's second missionary journey, which took place somewhere between 50 and 52 A.D., that Paul arrives in Corinth. He was actually preaching in some of the Macedonian and Greek cities for some time. It was Paul's intention to go into Asia with the gospel but the Lord had other plans for him.

ACT 16:9-10 “During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.”

When the Lord spoke Paul responded immediately. And so, they head over to Macedonia which is modern day Greece and Paul first arrives in Neapolis and then begins moving west going into the coastal cities of Philippi where Paul and Silas were beaten and thrown into prison for casting out a demon from a woman who was bringing a great deal of money to her masters.

It was in Philippi that Paul had the opportunity, while in jail, to witness to the jailer because of an earthquake which opened all the prison doors and he thought everyone escaped.

ACT 16:27-30 “The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted, “Don’t harm yourself! We are all here!” The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved - you and your household.”

From there they went to Thessalonica where, as was his custom, he entered the local synagogue, being a former Pharisee and a Jew, and preached from the O.T. Scriptures about the Messiah whom he proved from the Scriptures was none other than Jesus of Nazareth. But like in Philippi, he ran into some problems.

ACT 17:4-6 “Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women. But the Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason’s house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd. But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other brothers before the city officials, shouting: “These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar’s decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus.”

Well, from there Paul slips out of Thessalonica in the dead of night and sets out for Berea. Again, Paul goes to the Synagogue to teach about Jesus Christ the Messiah and actually finds that the Bereans are much more receptive to the gospel.

ACT 17:11-12 “Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. Many of the Jews believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men.”

I’m sure this was a breath of fresh air to Paul who had been accustomed to opposition from everywhere. But the enemy is not going to disappoint Paul here in Berea because as is the case with

the previous cities in Macedonia we read that trouble is about to come on him even in Berea.

ACT 17:13-15 “When the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God at Berea, they went there too, agitating the crowds and stirring them up. The brothers immediately sent Paul to the coast, but Silas and Timothy stayed at Berea. The men who escorted Paul brought him to Athens and then left with instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible.”

Paul can't seem to get a break. But now he moves on to Athens and has a very interesting encounter there with many of the local philosophers.

ACT 17:16-18 “While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbling trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.”

A short time later Paul is taken to a place where all of the local philosophers hang out called the Areopagus. It is here where Paul poses some facts before them to think about.

ACT 17:22-31 Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you. "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.' "Therefore

since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone - an image made by man's design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead."

Well, things seem to be going very well with this encounter. No one is trying to stone him or beat him or cause the crowds to raise up in riots. This would seem like a good place to start a church, be the Pastor and make lots of converts wouldn't it? Possibly, but not unless God calls Paul to such a work there. In this case our Lord doesn't. And so, Paul moves on.

And guess where he goes? That's right. Corinth. He's been on the road for months and he now leaves Athens and goes west a few miles crossing that little isthmus, that little stretch of land connecting Greece with the peninsula, which is part of Greece, known as Peloponnesus.

On arriving in Corinth Paul meets an interesting couple and strikes up a friendship with them.

ACT 18:1-3 "After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them."

Evidently, Aquila had set up shop there in Corinth as he was making and selling tents. In all likelihood they were living in a tent there in Corinth. It would be today's equivalent of living in a model home you were trying to sell. People could see your craftsmanship and the quality of product and you could walk away with tents which could be sold in different parts of the world.

Paul now comes on to the scene and since he too had been trained in making tents he could be a real asset to Aquila and Priscilla as they doubled their output. But Paul's ministry was not to be making tents to the exclusion of his mission of bringing the gospel to the world. And so, at least on the Sabbath he was about teaching and preaching in Corinth.

ACT 18:4 “Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.”

But it would not be long before Paul could once again begin to devote his entire time to the gospel. His two friends and fellow workers Silas and Timothy were going to rejoin him and they would enable Paul to be freed up to carry on his work. Maybe they had brought some of the offerings from the previous churches in Macedonia to help Paul in his ministry.

ACT 18:5-7 “When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ. But when the Jews opposed Paul and became abusive, he shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, “Your blood be on your own heads! I am clear of my responsibility. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.” Then Paul left the synagogue and went next door to the house of Titius Justus, a worshiper of God.”

Paul loved his Jewish brethren and he would go to them first with the gospel about the Messiah Jesus, but once they had determined that they wanted nothing to do with the One true Christ Paul chose to go to those he had been called to minister to and that was the Gentiles.

Here in Corinth he left the Synagogue and went to the house of Titius Justus which evidently was right next door to the Synagogue. From this house Paul instructed those in that city and would use it as a central point of focus for the church which would arise in that city.

Apparently, Paul’s attempts to bring the gospel to the Jews was cut off because of the stubbornness of their hearts and we would also be tempted to think that none of them could be saved. And yet we would be wrong. God can turn the heart of anyone. And this is what our Lord does in the heart of one Jew who happened to be the leader of that Synagogue.

ACT 18:8 “Crispus, the synagogue ruler, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard him believed and were baptized.”

We all may wonder at times how successful our ministries are going to be and if we will ever see the fruit of our work. And yet, it is the Lord who causes the growth and it is the Lord who turns the heart. And as long as we persevere and remain faithful to the

work set before us God will bless it and prosper it according to His will and timetable.

Paul just stayed faithful to teach and preach the word of God. And if he received opposition he continued to stay on the path and do the work by the grace of God. By the way, Paul would meet with opposition in Corinth as the jealous Jews, once again, began to stir up trouble for Paul.

They went to the leaders in Corinth and accused him of teaching a religion which was contrary to Roman law, but the rulers dismissed the charges as frivolous.

ACT 18:14-16 Just as Paul was about to speak, Gallio said to the Jews, "If you Jews were making a complaint about some misdemeanor or serious crime, it would be reasonable for me to listen to you. But since it involves questions about words and names and your own law -settle the matter yourselves. I will not be a judge of such things." So he had them ejected from the court."

Well, this made the Jews furious and since they couldn't get to Paul they decided to pick on the one man they felt should have been able to bring a case against Paul and that was one of their own.

ACT 18:17 "Then they all turned on Sosthenes the synagogue ruler and beat him in front of the court. But Gallio showed no concern whatever."

By this time Gallio was upset with the Jews for wasting his time and figured that if they wanted to beat up on each other he wouldn't stop them. And so, Paul continued to serve the Corinthian church for quite some time knowing that God was with him and would protect him.

ACT 18:9-11 "One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city." So Paul stayed for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God."

For a year and half Paul pastored that particular church. But at the end of that time it was time to get back on the road with the original call the Lord had given him; to be the apostle to all the Gentile world. He had places to go and people to see as the Lord led him on the way he should go.

From Corinth Paul went to Ephesus where he stayed for a short time, but after traveling in some of the surrounding areas he went back to Ephesus and ministered there. In fact, he met in a school building where he taught the Scriptures daily. It's known as the lecture hall of Tyrannus. And so, Paul would have no problem with us meeting in a school building.

He spent three years in Ephesus (Eph.20:31) teaching and preaching and leading people to Christ. And it was during this particular time in 55 A.D. that Paul learned that the church, which was previously under the leadership of Apollos, was having some real problems.

Evidently, Apollos went on from Corinth to minister elsewhere and the leadership in Corinth was not strong enough to deal with some real issues which began to divide that church. Paul did urge Apollos to go back but maybe he wasn't willing to drop in on the middle of the mess in Corinth. Timothy would also be approached by Paul to help out.

1CO 16:10-14 "If Timothy comes, see to it that he has nothing to fear while he is with you, for he is carrying on the work of the Lord, just as I am. No one, then, should refuse to accept him. Send him on his way in peace so that he may return to me. I am expecting him along with the brothers. Now about our brother Apollos: I strongly urged him to go to you with the brothers. He was quite unwilling to go now, but he will go when he has the opportunity. Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be men of courage; be strong. Do everything in love."

These were tough times for many churches and the church at Corinth was no exception, but praise God there were some faithful people in that church who were concerned enough to contact Paul in Ephesus. One such group was from the household of Chloe who got word out to him.

1CO 1:11 "My brothers, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you."

Someone had even sent a letter discussing some of the specific problems and Paul recognizes this letter in 1CO 7:1 "Now for the matters you wrote about:..."

There was even a delegation from Corinth who personally went to Ephesus to discuss these problems and encouraged Paul that they were aware of it and were trying to deal with it.

1CO 16:17-18 “I was glad when Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus arrived, because they have supplied what was lacking from you. For they refreshed my spirit and yours also. Such men deserve recognition.”

Some of the problems included divisions in the church, immorality and problems concerning marriage, food, worship and the resurrection. It appears that they were a mess, but as we’ll discover many of their concerns were the same that other churches had and at least they were able to get some answers which you and I can benefit from today.

We’ll start in verse one next week and take an adventure through the epistle we know as 1Corinthians. May our hearts be open to God’s word and like newborn babes may we long for the pure milk of the word that by it we may grow in respect to our salvation.