

1 Corinthian Introduction

Soon after Jesus is crucified, Antioch in Syria becomes the dominant location for his followers. This happens because the Jerusalem Christians are driven out by stones, murderous threats, and executions at the hand of none other than the writer of 1 Corinthians. When Stephen cries out in his last breath, “do not hold this sin against them,” Saul is watching, approving. He might have only been watching there, but and subsequently “ravaging the church of God in Jerusalem.” And this great persecution drove the gospel and the Christians North 300 miles, to Antioch, the capital of gentile Syria. Instead of blowing out, this little candle lit a fire there in Antioch, and over a 10 year period, non-Jews, in not so little quantities join the ranks of Jesus the Messiah. These Hellenists (Greeks) produced a major set of complications to the Jesus-following Jews in Israel and other places, because they didn’t know what to do with them. What laws should they follow? And so, the remaining disciples, some still hanging low in Jerusalem sent a faithful man named Barnabas, to Antioch, to check out these reports.

What he finds in Antioch, both fascinating and shocking at the same time, is a church that I would say looks like a modern day refugee camp. Let’s pray that God graces us with something like this. Syrians, Greeks, Romans, Jews, many foreigners, joining together in worship of the risen Jesus. Not only were the Gentiles attracted to the gospel, but it seems that the persecution the Christians had endured actually seemed to be a catalyst of its spread. We are reminded of an old Isaianic prophecy, speaking of the Messiah, “I will make you a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth (Isa 49:6). God’s love was not to be kept for any one race or ethnic subgroup alone but for all who will respond to the gospel. In essence, even the early disciples were spectators as they watched the gospel spread, especially among the persecuted, the displaced, the orphaned, and the foreigner.

When Barnabas saw this, it says he was glad, and immediately recognized the need for help. Ironically or divinely, he goes to look for non-other than, the persecutor now turned believer, to be the leading influence at Antioch. On the macro level, we never know what God is doing, but we know that he can use all things toward his purposes. In Antioch, under Paul, the displaced followers of Jesus are first called Christians. Much later, Paul writes something that reminds me of this. In Ephesians 2:11-22, “you are no longer strangers and aliens (sojourners), but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God... brought near by the blood of Christ.” Tell me that message doesn’t strike a chord to the refugee, the sojourner, the alien... contrasted to the airs that normally come, “get out of here!”

Antioch becomes the primary missions sending church of Christianity. They fasted and prayed, laid hands on Barnabas and Paul, and sent them to the western lands to preach and plant churches. More often than not they were mocked out of the Jewish synagogues and run out of town. In Lystra, Paul is stoned by a mob, they drag him out of the city, and leave his body for dead on the side of the road. Miraculously he survives and makes it back to Antioch. Far from defeated, he declares that despite the persecutions by the Jews, the gospel is being received by the Gentiles and urges another missionary journey, one that will take him all the way to the Greek Isles, ultimately to establish a church at far away Corinth. This time with Silas, he walks through Lystra again (where he was left for dead), he makes a new acquaintance, young Timothy. From the city where Paul was hurt the worst, God provided a young convert that would become for him the greatest companion and ally in his life. Once again, we see God’s uncanny ability to take huge discouragements, and bring out of them blessings.

Paul, and Silas, and Timothy travel for almost 3000 miles (mostly on foot), spreading the gospel to the main Greek cities we are most familiar with (Philippi, Thessalonica, Athens, and eventually Corinth). I need to say this as a quick reminder, they were jailed in Philippi, Mobbed in Thessalonica, and mocked in Athens. Is any of this in the background of Paul's words in **1 Cor 2:3-4**, "When I came, brothers, I came with just the message of a crucified Jesus, "and I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling." Why wouldn't this just be a repeat? I brought very little personally. I had a message, very little worldly wisdom, and he admits weakness, fear, and trembling. Isn't that the classic excuse, "I can't talk to my unsaved friends. I can't say anything to my unsaved co-workers and family. I don't know enough, I'm not eloquent!" I'm pretty sure that at a minimum we can all muster this combination, "message of Jesus, weakness, fear, and trembling." Just try it and see what happens. In this case, let's see what God can do with that combination.

First of all, the city's reputation long preceded Paul's arrival. This was the harlot of the Mediterranean. If he had been in spiritually dark cellars before, this was morally the dark corner. We never know how the gospel is going to be received. In places that you might think are easier, the gospel bounces off. But, here in this dark hole, we find suddenly fertile soil, and a large church is born. Just like Antioch, Corinth becomes a melting pot of new believers in Jesus. Of the three years that Paul spent on this second missionary journey, half of it was in Corinth, a full 18 months.

Corinth:

Compared to the now sleepy old hamlet of Athens, a shadow of golden age from days gone by, first century Corinth was all neon signs and big business. Maybe all roads lead to Rome, but the money trickles through Corinth. This was the largest Greek city of the time, a provincial capital, situated on a little Isthmus [isthmus], where it commanded entirely the land routes between central Greece and the Peloponnese. It had two harbors, one on both sides (East Cenchrea, and West Lechaem), and became the hub for Mediterranean trade. I've been to many cities of the Biblical world, but Corinth has eluded us so far, so I really enjoyed Google earth. Mainland Greece is mountainous to the North, and the Peloponnese is mountainous to the south, but you can see it clear as day, right in the middle is a flat and fertile plain. On the southern side of the plain is a big rugged mountain, and the city was built just at the foot of that mountain on the North side, overlooking the plain and the Gulf. From the Acropolis (which served as a citadel), came two fountains, one to serve the citadel, and the other the city, and it formed an inexhaustible supply of water. What a perfect setup in terms of commercial advantages, and like other well situated cities, experienced a huge amount of prosperity.

An ancient railroad idea was built across the land, called the **Diolkos** (dia, "across", and Holkos "portage machine"). This was a paved trackway of limestone with parallel grooves, where they could roll ships overland. This allowed ancient vessels to avoid the long and dangerous journey around. Mostly it transferred goods, but could also be used to transfer vessels if needed (handy in Naval campaigns). It was about 4 miles, and was a rudimentary railway, and had been operational since ancient times 600BC to the mid 1st Century. Much quicker way to get to Athens, if they went straight across the Saronic gulf. So Paul might have caught the tail end of this enterprise. If I was going to have a business, Corinth is a huge hub. As it turned out, a persecution had happened in Rome under the edict of Claudius, and all the Jews were kicked out. One business man and his wife took the opportunity to open up a branch in Corinth, and Paul bumps into them immediately.

Money flowed through the city, in the form of sailors, business men, Roman expats, and slaves. This was a city that knew luxury, entertainment (Isthmian games), and with luxury came laxity of morals and a never ending outflow of pleasure. You might have already heard, but the Greek word, “To Korinthanize” was synonymous for debauchery and sin. I think of our classic “sin city” USA, or Bangkok Thailand, or Amsterdam. You know in any of these cities you can find any vice you want, and Corinth was the attraction of the Ancient world.

The Temple that crowned the AcroCorinthus, was the center worship of Aphrodite, goddess of sexual pleasure. She was pictured alongside of the gods of the ancient world (Melkart of Tyre) and Ares the god of war. The Isthmian games took place every two years, honoring the sea-god Poseidon. You can hear in the voice of Paul that Corinth paid honor “to many gods and many lords.” (1 Cor 8:5).

Greek geographer Strabo, 20AD, “The temple of Aphrodite was once so rich that it had acquired more than a thousand prostitutes, donated by both men and women to the service of the goddess. And because of them, the city used to be jam-packed and became wealthy. The ship-captains would spend fortunes there, and so the proverb says: “The voyage to Corinth isn’t for just any man.”

Paul has a lot to say in this book about the common lusts that grip our hearts. Power, factions and divisions, lawsuits, immorality. All of this will be part of our study in this book. There’s nothing new under the sun. Very much like ancient Corinth, our culture of tolerance has become a god in its own right. The pressure we face of calling something sin today is strong. Being marginalized by the term repentance is normal. It will be good for us a congregation to hear Paul’s stance against a whole multitude of sins and lusts and traps that grip our hearts today. He says in 6:9, “Do not be deceived, neither sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, thieves, greedy, drunkards, revilers, swindlers [and such were some of you] will inherit the kingdom of God.” But the gospel actually transformed lives... [not without difficulties]!

Paul sees converts from Jews and Gentiles, high profile people. A roman official Titius Justus (BTW well known Roman family in history), who lives next door to the synagogue is saved, and when Paul is thrown out of the synagogue, he opens his home to the start of the Corinthian church. **Acts 18:7-8** From the Jews, the synagogue ruler Crispus is saved. (He always makes me hungry). Other Corinthians are being saved, so you have an amalgamation of all kinds of people. It’s so exciting when people are saved, especially when you can see God’s favor, which Paul had in Corinth. **Acts 18:9-11**

He spends a year and a half in Corinth, and heads back to Antioch.

Corinthian correspondence

It’s not until his 3rd missionary journey, and a stay of 3 years in Ephesus, that Paul writes this letter to the Corinthians. It’s not the first letter, it’s at least the second letter (5:9). While in Ephesus three of his friends (Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus) come from Corinth responding to his first letter, with their own report and words. You can tell from this letter Paul really missed his Corinthian friends, but he found out there were some dramatic problems going on.” They came bearing a message, “our congregation is being torn apart by quarreling (1:11). In its most basic form, the book can be divided into two sections. 1) Paul’s response to reports about factions and immoralities. 2) Paul’s response to the specific questions that the Corinthians had asked him (marriage, food, idolatry, freedom in Christ, covering of heads in church, tongues, spiritual gifts, resurrection).

1 Corinthians

Read 1:2, "To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and our."

If you know anything about the book, does that make you chuckle? Many were saved in Corinth, but how easily they fell prey to worldliness. They became divided and so morally lax, they were accepting a relationship even the pagans didn't accept. **"To those in Corinth, sanctified in Christ, called to be saints."** Even communion was broken, one side getting drunk, eating and feasting while the other went hungry (11:21). When we read through this book, we might be tempted to say, "these guys are definitely not saints..." But that's the point. The gospel liberates enslaved people through sanctification, and leads them to holiness in the process called sanctification.

I spoke to the YG this Wednesday about holiness, and I asked them the question, "Do you desire that your life is characterized by holiness." I shared that it has honestly taken long into my adult life (even as a Christian) to even be ok with the word. It's kind of weird, but I think in my heart I often scorned sanctification. I don't think as a teenager I wanted to be a "saint" or "sanctified." I'd heard pastors and preachers use the word "saints," and it made me snicker. I know I'm not a saint, and I'm pretty sure most of the people I hang out with aren't either. It took forever for me to understand, "That is God's will [in my broken life], is sanctification (1 Thess 4:3)."

What a perfect introduction to this book. A church can be messy at times. Relationships in a church can be messy, but that's because we're messy and we're in the process of being sanctified. Everyone who claims to be a believer, should not be afraid of asking the question, "Am I becoming holy? Am I being sanctified in the course of my life?" When we love someone, the friend, the grandma, the grandpa, the brother, the son, [ourselves] it's so hard not to wish the best for them spiritually. Our emotions sometimes get the best of us and we reason, "She prayed a prayer once. They use to go to church. They know the right stuff." Let's not be afraid to ask the one question that cuts through everything. "Do they desire holiness? Do you desire holiness? Despite moments of wrong or transgressions, is there a desire to personally agree with the God of this Bible." A faith which does not have a sanctifying influence is not much different from the faith of demons. If there is no sanctification in life, there is no regeneration of heart.

JC Ryle says that our sanctification will stand next to us as a witness to our character in the day of Jesus. This will be the evidence that shines brightly when everything else fades like dross. We need this process now, on earth, so that we can be fully aware of what the presence of God is like. How many people think they want heaven for the bliss, but don't pair the fact that sanctification is the preparation for us to actually be able to enjoy heaven. A holy place, holy inhabitants, gathered together "as saints with all those who in every place call upon the name of the LORD." Do you want to be holy?

One thing sanctification is not, is a further removal from inward and outward spiritual conflict, between the old nature and the new. Some think the struggle is too strong, so they are obviously not being sanctified. More scary is the "believer" who is unconcerned with the sanctification process in his/her life. In fact, that painful agony, that toil to align ourselves with God's mind is "proof" that we are spiritually alive, not dead. Again JC Ryle defines holiness as, "the habit of being of one mind with God, agreeing with God's judgment, hating what he hates, loving what He loves and measuring everything by

the standard of His word. He who most entirely agrees with God, he is the most holy man.” (42) Isn’t that a much more definition of holiness, than just being without sin. I can be discouraged to work on sanctification if I see sin in my life. But according to His definition, I might see sin in my life, and agree with God, and love what he loves, and hate what he hates, and confess the sin, and grow in holiness. We’re not defeated. We are victors, growing in holiness.

So it’s appropriate for Paul to remind the Corinthians of who they are, and what they’re becoming. I want to look quickly at sanctification in three phases:

1. Sanctification is a declaration that has a beginning: At conversion a moral change occurs in our lives. We can no longer continue to live in continual sin. We can push God’s voice to the side, but we can no longer endure a life of continual habitual unfettered rebellion. This is probably what Paul intends to show here in his opening salutation. Paul alludes to it again in 6:11, “and such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified...” This initial step breaks us apart from the world we are living in. It breaks the Corinthians from being *korinthianizers*, it breaks us from being of this world, so that we are no longer home-bound here, but become citizens of heaven, citizens of the kingdom of God. The power of sin’s stranglehold is broken, and it’s dominion is no longer reigning over our lives, so that we are actually equipped with power to overcome its previous stranglehold. Praise God for that step, but the second stage is where we really see the reality of that transformation.
2. Sanctification is a positive progression that grows over a lifetime, working itself out through failures and victories [this is the bulk of our life]. Though the Corinthians had been saved, as we will very clearly see in this Epistle, much of the old self is still hanging on, and in need of being eradicated. Jealous factions, knowledge that puffs up holding on like a dead carcass... When Paul writes to them again in 2 Cor 3:18, he says, “we are all being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another.” This is the process.
 - a. And it isn’t passive either. We are in Scripture very clearly to “strive... for holiness without which we will not see the Lord.” Heb. 12:14. This is the essence of the NT, growing in Christ likeness.
3. Sanctification is completed in death (never in this life). Though the struggle will always continue, at death the believer is joined to eternal peace and rest, and perfect rest is predicated mainly on a soul that is liberated from the struggle with indwelling sin. It is that sin that corrupts every part of us, emotionally, spiritually, even physically, and it’s ultimate victory is in Christ, in death, raised to new life. And Paul happens to hint pretty clearly at that in this letter as well. The best chapter, though wordy, is 15 on the resurrection. He proposes two men. The man of dust and the man of heaven. The man of dust represented by Adam, and the man of heaven represented by Christ. And every life that embraces Christ, working out their salvation sees the man of dust nearing the man of heaven, so that he can say in 15:49, “just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven.” Sanctified, perfected, holy! And that is the victory, the drive for which all of this makes sense.

I want to have a few practical thoughts from this:

1. Ryle’s definition of holiness really helped me. If I just think of holiness as simply being without sin, there’s a chance I could find myself fairly discouraged, maybe even say “what’s the use?”

“He who learns to agree the most with God...” That’s tangible. Of course there is sin, but each time agreeing with God and instantly confessing, that’s success.

2. Sanctification should not be a discouraging process. A lack of any sanctification process at all, might reveal the true spiritual condition. However, a believer should not shy away, nor be afraid of it. The presence of an indwelling sin is not a litmus test against it. Otherwise who could stand? Focus instead, on the big picture, over enough time, and see if your desires have grown closer to God, if you are more sensitive to his words.

There’s no hiding it. It’s the hardest thing we need to do as believers. It takes diligence, effort, prayer, vigilance, support. But it’s also the most rewarding. If you lost sight of why?

I feel like Paul should end the message, “Therefore, my beloved brothers” [he has called them saints, he has admonished them severely] Victory is up ahead. Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord, your labor is not in vain.” Who needs more than that?