

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Good News that Changed Cities: Corinth Acts 18:1 18

Good morning. We come to the final talk in the series, "Good News that Changed Cities", with a consideration of the city of Corinth. Our talk will be based on Acts 18:1-18.

Historical Corinth

J Hunter's commentary¹ on 1 Corinthians states, in the introduction, the following about Corinth and its inhabitants at the time of Paul's initial visit: "Corinth was the capital of the Roman province of Achaia. It was situated on the narrow neck of land between the Corinthian Gulf and the Saronic Gulf. Such a strategic situation on the Isthmus of Corinth made it a point where all trade routes met, and so it would appeal to Paul as an ideal centre from which the Gospel could radiate. Because of its position, Corinth became one of the greatest trading and commercial centres of its day. All traffic from north and south of Greece had to pass through Corinth, and much of the traffic from east and west chose to do the same, so Corinth was very prosperous. It acquired great prestige, and it is reckoned the population was around 500,000 to 700,000. The Isthmian Games were held there, and were second only to the Olympic Games. Corinth was rich, populous and cosmopolitan."

Corinth seemed to have everything going for it, riches and prosperity. However, Corinth had a downside. To quote again from J Hunter: "Corinth was a very wicked city, noted for evil and immoral living. The expression 'to Corinthianise' meant to live with drunken and immoral debauchery. There was one source of evil, the temple of Aphrodite. Attached to it, it is said, were 1,000 Temple virgins or sacred prostitutes, vestal virgins. The sexual act was considered an act of devotion and consecration to the goddess. Corinth was synonymous with wealth and luxury, drunkenness and debauchery, all forms of evil and filth. It was the Sodom of its day."

If we remove the references to the "temple of Aphrodite", then the above description could be written over most of the big cities in the world today.

It is against this back ground that Paul, who would be aware of the reputation of Corinth, travelled to and arrived in the city. Paul had been given clear divine guidance in Acts 16:6-10 which states, "*Now when they had gone through Phrygia and the region of Galatia, they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia. After they had come to Mysia, they tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit did not permit them. So, passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas. And a vision appeared to Paul in the night. A man of Macedonia stood and pleaded with him, saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.'*" Now after he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go to Macedonia, concluding that the Lord had called us to preach the Gospel to them." The call "to come ... and help us" gave the clear direction for Paul to preach the Gospel in Europe. Corinth was just one of many cities that Paul visited to preach the Gospel.

Arrival in Corinth, lodgings and work

Let us read from Acts 18:1-3, "*After these things Paul departed from Athens and went to Corinth. And he found a certain Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla (because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to depart from Rome); and he came to them. So, because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and worked; for by occupation they were tentmakers.*"

Upon his arrival Paul finds a fellow countryman and his wife living in the city, Aquila and Priscilla by name. We know from other scriptures that these two people were fellow believers. I assume Paul would seek out and wherever possible he would lodge with fellow Christians. An additional benefit, as far as Paul was concerned, was that Aquila and Priscilla had the same trade as Paul. Because of this, Paul worked at "tent making" and earned his keep to support his activities in the city of Corinth. In another of Paul's letters to believers, he states in 2 Thessalonians 3:10, "*For even when we were with you, this we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat.*" Paul was a Christian who practised what he preached.

Initial preaching in the synagogue

Let us now read Acts 18:4-6: "*And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and persuaded both Jews and Greeks. When Silas and Timothy had come from Macedonia, Paul was compelled by the Spirit, and testified to the*

Jews that Jesus is the Christ. But when they opposed him and blasphemed, he shook his garments and said to them, 'Your blood be upon your own heads; I am clean. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.'"

Although Paul had found lodgings and work, he set aside the Sabbath day to undertake his main purpose for coming to the city of Corinth. In Acts 18:4, we find Paul in the synagogue preaching and reasoning with Jews and Greeks. Today we may find it strange that Paul would start his preaching in the synagogue. If there was any place in this corrupt city, it would be the synagogue where God's word would be read and spoken from. Paul, as a Jew by nationality and a visitor, would have opportunity both to read the scriptures and speak from them. Paul did this, seeking to persuade Jews and Greeks from the scriptures about the Lord Jesus Christ as the promised Messiah. It seems that when his two travel companions arrive, Silas and Timothy, Paul became even more urgent in pressing the claims of Jesus that He was the Christ (Messiah). As so often, Paul's preaching eventually raised up opposition and he was compelled to leave the synagogue.

Teaching and establishing converts in the Christian faith

Let us read Acts 18:7-8: *"And he departed from there and entered the house of a certain man named Justus, one who worshipped God, whose house was next door to the synagogue. Then Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed on the Lord with all his household. And many of the Corinthians, hearing, believed and were baptised."*

From earlier verses, we might have thought that Paul's preaching had little or no impact on the people in the synagogue. But Acts 18:7-8 show otherwise. We read of two people by name, one of whom is a person of influence in the synagogue, Crispus, who is described as the principal ruler of the synagogue. The other person, Justus, was obviously a devout godly man and the scriptures state he *"worshipped God."* It specifically states that he lived next door to the synagogue. I suppose Justus, and presumably his family, would never be late for the services. If possible, it is good to live as near as possible to your church fellowship or assembly. Not simply to never be late for services but it makes it easier to be involved in church activities. We also see that those who believed took a public stand and were baptised.

Being baptised is part of our practical salvation to be identified as a Christian. If people know that we have made that stand then it often avoids conflict situations. We may feel excluded at times but it is certainly better to take a public stand for our Lord Jesus Christ than to be involved in sin.

Long term mission work

Let us read Acts 18:9-11: *"Now the Lord spoke to Paul in the night by a vision, 'Do not be afraid, but speak, and do not keep silent; for I am with you, and no one will attack you to hurt you; for I have many people in this city.' And he continued there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them."*

If there was a possibility of Paul being discouraged and afraid about his Gospel activities in Corinth (he had after all been thrown out of the synagogue) then Acts 18:9-11 show the timely intervention of the Lord. In the night, Paul is given a clear word of encouragement. *"Do not be afraid, but speak, and do not keep silent; for I am with you, and no one will attack you to hurt you; for I have many people in this city."* Paul was not to be afraid seeing the Lord had promised to preserve him and his companions in the Gospel. This message to Paul also included an additional message of comfort, *"No one will hurt you."*

I know that there are times and situations where believers do get hurt and over the years, not just missionaries, but Christians in general suffer because of violent acts against them and some are even killed. In such situations, the Gospel is often watered with the blood of martyrs.

The Lord had promised that He had many people in that city of Corinth. Many were still to respond to the Gospel message as preached by Paul and his companions. This resulted in a long stay of eighteen months. So we have the founding of a large church or assembly.

In Paul's first letter to the believers we have an indication of the things taught while he was with them. The f1 Corinthians 1:1-6:20 appear to address issues which had come to Paul's attention and no doubt were contrary to his teaching during his eighteen month stay. In 1 Corinthians 7:1-16:24, Paul concentrates on issues raised in a letter that he had received from the Corinthians asking for clarification on practical issues.

Let us remind ourselves of some of the main points in 1 Corinthians 1-6. After his words of greeting and encouragement, Paul touches on the topic of unity. Starting at 1 Corinthians 1:10 he tackles the issue of favourite preachers. If left unchecked this problem would have caused divisions in the Corinthian church. Sadly, believers live with division today as highlighted by the various denominations in Christendom. Paul seeks to refocus their attention towards the Lord Jesus Christ and away from the Lord's servants, of whom Paul was only one among many. Paul identifies the problem in that the Corinthians were not behaving in a spiritual manner, they were carnal. Carnal

behaviour was inconsistent with their calling as believers in whom the Holy Spirit was dwelling. As a company of God's people, they were the temple of God. Paul was expecting that their lives be consistent with that holy calling.

Paul next moves on to moral behaviour of the believers there. A serious failing is initially detailed in 1 Corinthians 5. The issue was so serious that Paul states that their behaviour is worse than that of unbelievers. In 1 Corinthians 6 Paul tackles the issue of believers behaving in ungodly ways with each other in business - an important lesson in suffering loss. But Paul rebukes those who defraud fellow Christians. Lastly, in 1 Corinthians 6, Paul touches upon the issue of fornication, a wide spread practice among heathen worshippers in Corinth. Paul again brings out the truth of holiness in relation to this because each individual Christian is a temple of the Holy Spirit and therefore the body is defiled by unholy physical practices.

At the beginning of 1 Corinthians 7, we find Paul referring to a letter that the Corinthians had sent to him. It is possible that Paul had covered these issues during his stay in Corinth but now various practical situations had arisen and clarification was needed. Paul first tackles the issue of marriage and the sensitive issue of divorce. In 1 Corinthians 7 Paul seeks to identify the various situations which impact on marriage and the believers' responsibility. Next comes the issue of liberty in relation to what can or cannot be eaten. This was a very real concern at Corinth because of idolatry and, the underlying issues of demons and fellowship.

In 1 Corinthians 11, we come to detailed instructions as to church order for men and women and the conduct of Christians as they meet to remember the Lord Jesus in His death. 1 Corinthians 12 touches upon the role of believers in the church situation and the contribution that each makes because no one is superfluous.

The distribution of gifts to individuals as ordered by the Holy Spirit is discussed. 1 Corinthians 13 is a lovely chapter which would no doubt remind the Corinthians, and us, of the importance of love. Paul returns in 1 Corinthians 14 to further add to what he has already stated regarding gifts. The importance of understanding the circumstances when certain gifts should be used is stressed. 1 Corinthians 15 deals with the truth of resurrection, its impact now and in the future when all believers will be changed and caught up to glory. 1 Corinthians 16 draws the letter to a close with teaching on helping believers who are in need and closes with final greetings.

Opposition and consequences

Let us resume our consideration of Acts 18. Let us read Acts 18:12-17: *"When Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews with one accord rose up against Paul and brought him to the judgment seat, saying, 'This fellow persuades men to worship God contrary to the law.' And when Paul was about to open his mouth, Gallio said to the Jews, 'If it were a matter of wrongdoing or wicked crimes, O Jews, there would be reason why I should bear with you. But if it is a question of words and names and your own law, look to it yourselves; for I do not want to be a judge of such matters.' And he drove them from the judgment seat. Then all the Greeks took Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, and beat him before the judgment seat. But Gallio took no notice of these things."*

In Acts 18:12-17, we now come to the opposition that Paul, his work companions and the new converts faced as they stood firm in the Christian testimony. The opposition comes from those of Paul's own nation, the Jews. Opposition often arises when the Gospel reaches and brings people into the joy of sins forgiven. As was so often in the book of Acts, Paul is the main target of persecution. He is forcibly brought before Gallio, the Roman magistrate for the province of Achaia. The charge against him is of a religious nature. On this occasion Gallio is unwilling to intervene in what he called *"a question of words and names and your own law."* Gallio gives Paul no opportunity to defend himself as the case is immediately dismissed. However, Gallio is very clear that if the issue at hand had been *"a matter of wrongdoing or wicked crimes"* then he would have listened and given judgement. This resulted in the accusers being driven from the presence of the magistrate.

How wonderfully the Lord's promise to Paul in the night vision was fulfilled, *"no one will attack you to hurt you."* Paul was attacked and dragged before Gallio but Gallio was not interested in supporting the Jews. We then find that the Jews were not well liked people because these verses end with the statement, *"Then all the Greeks took Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, and beat him before the judgment seat. But Gallio took no notice of these things."* Previously Crispus had been the ruler in the synagogue, but he had accepted the Gospel message preached by Paul. Now it appeared that Sosthenes had taken his place.

Down through history, since the Lord Jesus Christ was crucified, the Jews have repeatedly been the target for attack and persecution. Life has not been easy for God's earthly people since that time. But it will not always be so. God will one day raise up the nation of Israel to prominence again. That will be after the church has been raptured. As a generalisation, the Gentile nations of the world may not like the Jewish people and some nations display open hostility towards them. It is not for Christians to follow in the same way. First we have a message of salvation to proclaim to all the world, irrespective of nationality. We are to show love towards all, not hatred. Although we may find the New Testament the main source of our teaching, the Old Testament provides us with the knowledge that God's earthly people will be recovered to blessing one day.

Conclusion of Paul's stay at Corinth

Let us now read the final verse for today. *“So Paul still remained a good while. Then he took leave of the brethren and sailed for Syria, and Priscilla and Aquila were with him. He had his hair cut off at Cenchrea, for he had taken a vow”* (Acts 18:18).

So we find that Paul remained a long time, eighteen months, in the city of Corinth. But there came a time when he needed to move on. Paul now makes his way to Syria but there are now two additional companions, Priscilla and Aquila. This couple were not only hospitable in Corinth and helped Paul to earn a living but now they wanted to be more actively involved in Gospel outreach.

We have a little comment at the end of this verse: Paul had his hair cut off because of a vow he had made. The vow and cutting off his hair did not contradict the truth that we find in the New Testament. This vow or commitment he had made was publicly sealed by cutting off his hair. Paul did not go out of his way to antagonise the Jewish people.

If they had fault with Paul it was because he preached Christ as the Saviour of sinners, which is the only way of salvation. To receive the forgiveness of sins was to truly accept the Lord Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. There is no other way to obtain salvation. Corinth was a changed city, in that it now had a Christian presence from which the Gospel would be proclaimed. Deliverance from sin and receiving eternal life would make a massive impact on the population.

RH McDaniel's hymn, "Since Jesus came into my heart" captures the change and joy that believers experience upon trusting in Christ's finished work of salvation. I will read part of the hymn.

*What a wonderful change in my life has been wrought
Since Jesus came into my heart!
I have light in my soul for which long I had sought,
Since Jesus came into my heart!*

*I have ceased from my wand'ring and going astray,
Since Jesus came into my heart!
And my sins which were many are all washed away
Since Jesus came into my heart!*

*I'm possessed of a hope that is steadfast and sure
Since Jesus came into my heart!
And no dark clouds of doubt now my pathway obscure,
Since Jesus came into my heart!*

The chorus:

*Since Jesus came into my heart,
Since Jesus came into my heart,
Floods of joy o'er my soul like sea billows roll,
Since Jesus came into my heart.*

Although Paul left Corinth he did not forget them. The two letters that he wrote cover a wide range of teaching to encourage this new church and to keep them on the right pathway as Christians, both as individuals and in the functioning of their churches and fellowships. Today, Paul's teaching is often disregarded because it does not fit with popular worldly ideas, which sadly sometimes infiltrate into our churches and fellowships. It is necessary to remind ourselves of God's standards and what He finds acceptable.

May the Lord bless and encourage you and thank you for listening.

Footnote:

1. What the Bible Teaches, 1 Corinthians (Hunter, J) ISBN: 9781904064411

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