

## **#9. THE CORINTHIAN CORRESPONDENCE**

1. **PAUL'S FIRST AND SECOND LETTERS TO THE CORINTHIANS** are named for the city where a fairly new church had been established by Paul during his Second Missionary Journey (Acts 18).
  - **Author and date** - Paul's authorship of the Corinthian letters has never seriously been questioned. Paul claims authorship in 1 Corinthians 1:1, 13; 3:4-6; 4:15; 16:21. He personally defends his apostleship with extensive biographical material found in 2 Corinthians 1-7. As early as 95AD, Clement of Rome identifies Paul as the author of Corinthians in another letter to the same church. Pauline authorship is also confirmed by Church Fathers Ignatius (110AD), Polycarp (135AD), and Tertullian (200AD).
  - 1 Corinthians was written in the winter or early spring of 55AD from Ephesus. Paul's intention was to remain in Ephesus until Pentecost (May/June 55AD), and then planned to stay in Corinth for the winter (Acts 20:31; 1 Corinthians 16:6-8).
  - 2 Corinthians was probably written in late 55AD or early 56AD. After leaving Corinth in 52AD, Paul sailed for Caesarea, completing his Second Missionary Journey (Acts 18:18). In 52AD, Paul returned to Ephesus on his Third Missionary Journey (52AD). According to Acts 19, Paul ministered in Ephesus for nearly three years, and wrote 1 Corinthians during this time (1 Corinthians 16:8), probably in 55AD.
  - Corinth was located in southern Greece, about 45 miles from Athens. Corinth was a major trade city. Another important draw to Corinth was the Isthmian Games (a contemporary event paralleling the Olympic Games in Athens). Corinth had such a culture of wickedness, that its name was synonymous with poor morals. Hence, a prostitute anywhere in the Roman world might be known as a *Corinthian Girl*, and to *corinthianize* meant to define something as morally reprehensible.
  - The Temple of Aphrodite (the Greek goddess of love) sat atop the city's Acropolis (a location rising 2,000 feet above the city). Over 1,000 *sacred prostitutes* lived there and would come down into the city throughout the day to offer their services to residents and visitors.
  - Paul ministered in Corinth for about 18 months (Acts 18:11). Near the end of that time he was brought before a Roman Tribunal by some of the Jewish leaders of the city. The case was dismissed since Paul had broken no civil laws. It was at this point that he left for Ephesus with co-workers Aquila and Priscilla. From Ephesus, he returned to Israel.

- Perhaps because of the extremely carnal nature of the culture, the Corinthian church struggled with many difficulties. There were divisive factions, sexual sins in abundance, and dysfunctional worship and abuse of spiritual gifts.
- There may have been as many as four letters written to Corinthian Christians. The first is referred to as 1 Corinthians 5:9, which also appears to be highly corrective. It is referred to as *the lost epistle*, since we have no copy of it. Then 1 Corinthians was written. There may have been a third correspondence between 1 and 2 Corinthians which is referred to as *the severe letter* (2 Corinthians 2:4).

2. **Paul's emphasis** is on correcting behavior. He is answering questions, rebuking carnality, and dealing with difficult circumstances. Because of this, we see many doctrines addressed, even if not thoroughly dealt with. There are pockets of detailed instruction however. Paul speaks at length concerning the Lord's Supper, the protocol of spiritual gifts, and the Resurrection. He writes eloquently about the Cross and the contrast between God's wisdom and human wisdom.

### 3. Key Chapters

- 1 Corinthians 1-6 are Paul's corrections of disorder and disunity within the Corinthian congregation.
- 1 Corinthians 7-16 appears to be answers to questions sent to Paul about marriage, spiritual liberty, public worship, and the Resurrection.
- 2 Corinthians 1-13 is essentially a defense of Paul's ministry, including his authority and his right to discipline the members of the congregation, and his receiving of a relief offering for the Jerusalem church.

### 4. Key Verses

- **1 Corinthians 13** - is a treasure trove of beloved passages. Perhaps one of the most quoted portions of Scripture is chapter 13.
  - 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 NKJV Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. <sup>2</sup>And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. <sup>3</sup>And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing. <sup>4</sup>Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; <sup>5</sup>does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; <sup>6</sup>does not

rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; <sup>7</sup>bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. <sup>8</sup>Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away. <sup>9</sup>For we know in part and we prophesy in part. <sup>10</sup>But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away. <sup>11</sup>When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. <sup>12</sup>For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known. <sup>13</sup>And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

- **2 Corinthians 1:3-7 NIV** Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, <sup>4</sup>who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. <sup>5</sup>For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ. <sup>6</sup>If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. <sup>7</sup>And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.
- **2 Corinthians 5:1-10 NIV** For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. <sup>2</sup>Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, <sup>3</sup>because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. <sup>4</sup>For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. <sup>5</sup>Now the one who has fashioned us for this very purpose is God, who has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come. <sup>6</sup>Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. <sup>7</sup>For we live by faith, not by sight. <sup>8</sup>We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. <sup>9</sup>So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. <sup>10</sup>For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.
- **2 Corinthians 5:20, 21 NIV** We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. <sup>21</sup>God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.
- **2 Corinthians 12:1-10 ESV** It is doubtless not profitable for me to boast. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord: <sup>2</sup>I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a one was caught up to the third heaven. <sup>3</sup>And I know such a man—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows— <sup>4</sup>how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.

<sup>5</sup>Of such a one I will boast; yet of myself I will not boast, except in my infirmities. <sup>6</sup>For though I might desire to boast, I will not be a fool; for I will speak the truth. But I refrain, lest anyone should think of me above what he sees me *to be* or hears from me. <sup>7</sup>And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. <sup>8</sup>Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. <sup>9</sup>And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. <sup>10</sup>Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

#### 4. Key People

- **Paul** - the founding pastor of the church in Corinth. The story of Paul's ministry there is found in Acts 18:1-22.
- **Timothy** - the son of Eunice and grandson of Lois, Timothy is one of the earliest examples of leadership in the second generation of Christians. A native of Lystra, he was one of Paul's *sons in the faith* who traveled extensively with the apostle and eventually became pastor of the church in Ephesus. Tradition says he died in 97AD.
- **The Household of Chloe** - a faithful family in the Corinthian congregation who communicated with Paul about the disappointing behavior of some in the church.

#### 6. Key Places

- **Corinth** - a prominent cosmopolitan city in Greece of perhaps 250,000 citizens. It was a trade center, seaport, and the most important city in Achaia. Corinth may have existed as a city as early as the days of Abraham, but was refounded by Julius Caesar in 44BC.

#### 7. Key Themes

- **The destructive power of immorality** - unlike the more Jewish congregations, there was little tradition of moral living in Corinth. The city was extremely cosmopolitan - meaning there was a convergence of paganism and many false religions that did not necessarily teach the value of sexually chaste lifestyles.
- **The exercise of Christian liberty** - Paul would explain that not everything that is permissible is preferable or profitable. We must learn to live with other Believers in mind.

- **The necessity of proper worship** - the Corinthians were abusing both spiritual gifts and the Table of The Lord. Paul explained the proper protocol for each.
- **The Resurrection** - Paul systematically lays out the truth about Christ's Resurrection as well as our own. From this teaching we learn why the Resurrection of Christ is an essential truth that must be embraced by all true Christians.
- **The Christian virtue of giving** - Paul helped the Corinthians see why Christians should give of their time, talent, and treasures.

## 8. The Contents of 1 and 2 Corinthians

- **1 Corinthians**
  - **The Introduction - The Calling and Blessing of Christianity 1:1-9**
  - **The Problem of Disunity in the Church (1:10-4:21)**
    - Unity is essential (1:10-3:23)
    - Servanthood is spiritual (4:1-21)
  - **The Problem of Immorality in the Church (5:1-6:20)**
  - **The Problems Within Some Marriages in the Church (7:1-40)**
  - **The Problem of Misunderstanding Christian Liberty (8:1-11:1)**
  - **The Problems Associated with Worship in the Church (11:2-14:40)**
    - Understanding the roles of men and women (11:2-16)
    - Protocol for The Lord's Supper (11:17-34)
    - Protocol for Spiritual Gifts (12:1-14:40)
  - **The Misunderstanding about Resurrection (15:1-58)**
  - **Parting Advice (16:1-24)**

- Stewardship (16:1-4)
- Paul's personal note (16:5-24)
- **2 Corinthians**
  - **Paul's Greeting (1:1-11)**
  - **Paul's Ministry (1:12-7:16)**
    - Paul's intention (1:12-2:4)
    - Dealing with the sinful brother referred to in 1 Corinthians (2:5-11)
    - Titus' absence (2:12-13)
    - The nature of the Christian ministry modeled by Paul (2:14-6:10)
  - **The Offering for Jerusalem (8:1-9:15)**
    - The pattern for giving is modeled by Jesus and the Macedonian churches (8:1-9)
    - The purpose of giving (8:10-15)
    - The protocol of giving (8:16-9:5)
    - The promise of blessing tied to giving (9:6-15)
  - **Paul's Apostolic Credentials (10:1-12:13)**
    - Paul's authority given by God (10:1-18)
    - Paul's conduct vindicates his motives (11:1-15)
    - Paul's suffering is a sign of apostleship (11:16-33)
    - Paul's supernatural experience is seen as further validation of his life (12:1-13)
  - **Paul's Upcoming Visit (12:14-13:14)**

## Worth noting

- The Corinthian correspondence is full of Old Testament references:

- In 1 Corinthians:

- 1:9 refers to Isaiah 29:14
- 1:31 refers to Jeremiah 9:2
- 2:9 refers to Isaiah 64:4
- 2:16 refers to Isaiah 40:13
- 3:19 refers to Job 5:13
- 3:20 refers to Psalm 94:11
- 5:13 refers to Deuteronomy 17:7
- 6:16 refers to Genesis 2:24
- 9:9 refers to Deuteronomy 25:4
- 10:7 refers to Exodus 32:6
- 10:26 refers to Psalm 24:1
- 14:21 refers to Isaiah 28:11,12
- 15:27 refers to Psalm 8:6
- 15:32 refers to Isaiah 22:13
- 15:45 refers to Genesis 2:7
- 15:54 refers to Isaiah 25:8
- 15:55 refers to Hosea 13:14

- In 2 Corinthians:

- 4:13 refers to Psalm 116:10

- 6:2 refers to Isaiah 49:8
- 6:16 refers to Leviticus 26:12; Ezekiel 37:27
- 6:17 refers to Isaiah 52:11; Ezekiel 20:34
- 6:18 refers to 2 Samuel 8:14
- 8:15 refers to Exodus 16:18
- 9:9 refers to Psalm 112:9
- 10:17 refers to Jeremiah 9:24
- 13:1 refers to Deuteronomy 19:15

### **When reading Corinthians:**

- Don't be overwhelmed by the significant problems of the Corinthian church. Remember, this church was birthed by the Holy Spirit in what was perhaps the most corrupt city of the Roman Empire. We see profound sin - but we also see profound grace.
- The presence of the Holy Spirit's ministry (1 Corinthians 12-14) indicates growth was occurring, though it was often frustrated by carnality. Some Christians, citing the problems at Corinth, have abandoned Pentecostal expressions of worship. It should be noted, however, that Paul did not abandon Pentecostal manifestations, he sought to correct the imbalances that were present in the Corinthian assembly.
- Don't be concerned if you have some trouble getting into the flow of 2 Corinthians. I believe there are two reasons for this:
  - This is the most personal of Paul's letters. It is highly reminiscent of Paul's physical, emotional, and spiritual battles. These struggles of Paul are evident, and the result is limited systemization of his thought. It is difficult for a person of integrity to speak of their struggles for fear of sounding petty. It is even more difficult to speak of authority which has been given.
  - Paul is relating to a church with whom he has had significant conflict. He has enemies in the congregation - people who do not honor him as an apostle and founding pastor. He is defending himself on one hand, while reaching out in love with the other.