

Holy by Grace. Bound for Glory. Now What?  
**Missionary Church-Planter: Paul in Corinth**  
*1 Corinthians 1:1-3; Acts 18:1-18a*  
 Pastor Jason Van Bommel

*Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes,*

*<sup>2</sup> 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 ours:*

*<sup>3</sup> Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

– 1 Corinthians 1:1-3, ESV

*After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. <sup>2</sup> And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. And he went to see them, <sup>3</sup> and because he was of the same trade he stayed with them and worked, for they were tentmakers by trade. <sup>4</sup> And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks.*

*<sup>5</sup> When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with the word, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus. <sup>6</sup> And when they opposed and reviled him, he shook out his garments and said to them, “Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.” <sup>7</sup> And he left there and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God. His house was next door to the synagogue. <sup>8</sup> Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord, together with his entire household. And many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized. <sup>9</sup> And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, “Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, <sup>10</sup> for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people.” <sup>11</sup> And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.*

*<sup>12</sup> But when Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him before the tribunal, <sup>13</sup> saying, “This man is persuading people to worship God contrary to the law.” <sup>14</sup> But when Paul was about to open his mouth, Gallio said to the Jews, “If it were a matter of wrongdoing or vicious crime, O Jews, I would have reason to accept your complaint. <sup>15</sup> But since it is a matter of questions about words and names and your own law, see to it yourselves. I refuse to be a judge of these things.” <sup>16</sup> And he drove them from the tribunal. <sup>17</sup> And they all seized Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the tribunal. But Gallio paid no attention to any of this.*

*<sup>18</sup> After this, Paul stayed many days longer and then took leave of the brothers and set sail for Syria, and with him Priscilla and Aquila*

– Acts 18:1-18a

## **How Do We Measure Success?**

What makes someone successful? How do we define being successful? By some measures, JK Rowling has been the most commercially successful writer in the history of the English language. She is the first author to become a billionaire from her writing. The Harry Potter book series has sold approximately 500 million copies worldwide. Beatrix Potter's *Peter Rabbit* books have sold 150 million copies and *The Chronicles of Narnia* has sold 120 million copies. *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* together have sold 250 million copies. So, you'd almost have to add all of these other mega-best-sellers together to surpass the sales of the *Harry Potter* books. (By the way, Shakespeare's plays have sold an estimated 2 billion to 4 billion copies, dwarfed only by the Bible, which has sold an estimated 5 billion copies worldwide.)

But is this the only way to measure success? What about for Christian work? How do we measure the success of churches and missionaries? Is it all about numbers? How much control do we have over numbers? And, in spiritual matters, how much do numbers really matter or how much can they really measure?

The Apostle Paul is universally regarded as the most successful missionary in the history of the church – although, for much of his missionary life, you wouldn't have been able to convince him of that.

## **A. Corinth**

Today, we are starting a study of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. Well, we call it I Corinthians, and it is the first letter which Paul wrote to Corinth that is Holy Scripture; however, in I Corinthians 5:9, he makes reference to an earlier letter he had written to the church at Corinth, but still, this is the I Corinthian letter in the Bible.

We're digging into Acts 18 today, so we can understand the background to the letter and Paul's relationship to this church. But to understand the background even better, we need to know a little more about the city of Corinth. Paul comes to Corinth from Athens. Athens was the intellectual and philosophical center of Greece and of the whole Greco-Roman world or the Roman Empire. Yet Athens was a relatively small city of maybe 30,000 – 35,000 people. Corinth was the commercial center of Greece at this time, with a population of perhaps 200,000 people.

Corinth was so important commercially because of its location – Location, location, location. Corinth was located on a narrow isthmus of land that joined Northern Greece (Macedonia and part of Achaia) to Southern Greece (the Peloponnese, most of Achaia). This isthmus is about 4 miles wide. So, if you wanted to ship goods west-to-east or east-to-west, you could either sail more than 200 miles around the southern tip of Greece, which was very dangerous and time-consuming in ancient times, or you could transport your goods and your ship across the 4 miles of flat land. Most people chose the land transport.

You might think it would have been easier to dig a canal, and there is a canal there today. Nero started building a canal in 67 AD, about 16 years after Paul was in Corinth, but his labor force of 6,000 Jewish prisoners of war only made it about 700 meters before Nero died and the project was abandoned until the 1800's. So, easier said than done.

Besides being a major transportation hub, Corinth was also world-renowned for its beautiful architecture and its high-quality bronze. Ancient Jerusalem had a 75-foot-high gate of solid bronze called the Beautiful Gate, and the bronze was from Corinth.

Commercial activity was the primary lifeline of Corinth, but they also hosted the Isthmian Games, a festival of athletic and musical competitions in honor of the sea god Poseidon, held in the spring of the second and fourth years of each Olympiad at his sanctuary on the Isthmus of Corinth. So, Corinth was also well-known for sports and entertainment.

Finally, Corinth was home to a famous Temple of Aphrodite, or Venus as the Romans called her, and her Temple was served by 1,000 prostitutes who spread out into the city every night to “worship the goddess” by selling their bodies, with the proceeds going to the Temple. Corinth was so notorious for sexual immorality that there was an ancient Greek verb “to Corinthianize” or “to act like a Corinthian,” which was used to refer to someone who was being notoriously sexually immoral.

So, a prosperous culture known for commercial activity, sports, entertainment, and sexual immorality, Certainly, that’s nothing we can relate to, right? As we’ll see, there’s a good reason why I Corinthians is a letter with great relevance to our cultural realities in America in the year 2020.

## **B. Paul in Corinth**

Into Corinth in the year 50 or 51 comes the Apostle Paul. We know fairly exactly when Paul was in Corinth because of two clear references in the text:

*Verse 2: “he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome.” – Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome in 49 AD*

*Verse 12: “But when Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him before the tribunal” – Gallio was proconsul of Achaia in the year 51 or 52 AD*

In between these verses, in verse 11, we’re told that Paul remained in Corinth for a year and six months so it seems he arrived in the year 50, and then left in late 51 or maybe 52. These kinds of clear historical references are very helpful.

What had led Paul to Corinth in the year 50, less than 20 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus? Well, Paul’s conversion had happened some 16 years before, in about the year 34 AD, on the Road to Damascus, where he was travelling with orders in hand to arrest and imprison Christians. He had been present at the stoning of Stephen about two years before and was a leading persecutor of Christians.

God saved Saul of Tarsus in 34 AD. In the year 46 AD, Barnabas travelled from Antioch in Syria to Tarsus to get Paul, because the church in Antioch had experienced a great revival with many conversions and needed more trained leadership. The next year, in 47 AD, Paul and Barnabas head out on the first missionary journey in church history. Then, in the year 49, Paul is at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, which ruled that Christians were under no obligation to keep the dietary or ceremonial laws of Moses. Paul heads out again, splitting with Barnabas over a disagreement over John Mark, and then Paul is joined by Silas, who travels with him on this second missionary journey.

Before coming to Corinth, on this second missionary journey, Paul had been across Asia Minor (present-day Turkey) and then through northern Greece (Macedonia) in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea. Then, he went down to Athens and across to Corinth. In just about 4 years, Paul had been on two incredible missionary

journeys, where he had visited and started churches on Cyprus, across Asia Minor, in Macedonia and now in Achaia. He had been very active and very successful, except for the fact that he was very often chased out of town by violent mobs who wanted to kill him, and he was never able to stay in one place for long because of the constant threats on his life.

Here's how Paul would later describe his trials in 2 Corinthians 11 –

*Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant? – 2 Cor. 11:24-29, ESV*

Paul was on his own in Athens, having left Silas and Timothy behind in Berea. It also doesn't seem that he was successful in planting a church in Athens. Then, he travelled by himself from Athens to Corinth.

While in Corinth, things seemed to unfold according to a familiar pattern: Paul went to the synagogue on the Sabbath to reason with the Jews from the Scripture that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. After some time, the Jewish people of Corinth rejected Paul's message and drove him from the synagogue. Now, in other towns, like Lystra and Thessalonica, the Jewish people had organized violent mobs to drive Paul out. In fact, in Lystra, it was Jews from Antioch and Iconium who chased him down and stoned him and left him for dead. Just prior to coming to Corinth, he had a similar experience when people from Thessalonica had come to Berea and driven him from there.

So, sometime shortly after he left the synagogue, rejected by the Jewish people there, he apparently was making plans to leave Corinth, too. He had seen this movie before and didn't want to stick around for the ending. But in Corinth, God changed the movie script, and He provided for Paul, so Paul could stop running and stay for a year and a half.

### **C. God's Provision for Paul in Corinth**

It seems clear from the way God speaks to Paul in verse 9 that Paul is afraid and discouraged. Not only do we get this from Acts 18:9, but also from Paul's words later in 1 Corinthians 2:3. Paul says to the church at Corinth, "I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling." God meets His faithful servant in his fear and discouragement and provides wonderfully for him and for the church through him. He does this by providing people and a promise.

**People:** When Paul first came to Corinth alone, God immediately provided people for him, a couple who would become two of Paul's closest and most faithful partners in the Gospel work, Aquila and Priscilla. They had been driven out of Rome by the emperor, Claudius. And why did Claudius drive the Jews out of Rome? First Century secular Roman historian Seutonius says it was because the Jews were disputing over "Chrestus," which many scholars believe is a misconception of Christus, or Christ. So, it seems that the Jewish community in Rome was in an uproar over Jesus Christ, and the disturbance caused Claudius to ban them from Rome.

Aquila and Priscilla were a perfect provision for Paul, as they were fellow Jews and also fellow leatherworkers/tentmakers. They gave Paul a place to stay and work to do. He probably worked for them in their business; from what we know of Aquila and Priscilla, it would seem they were very successful tentmakers, for in a couple of cities where they lived, the church met in their home. It seems to me that they were already believers when they met Paul, though it's possible that Paul led them to the Lord early in his time in Corinth.

Next, God brought Silas and Timothy to Paul. They brought financial support from the church in Philippi, allowing Paul to step back from tentmaking and focus full-time on ministry. (Later, Paul would write to the Philippians, *"I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now."* – Philippians 1:3-5) When the Jewish people from the synagogue opposed and even reviled Paul, God provided a new meeting place right next door, in the home of Titius Justus, who is described as *"a worshipper of God,"* likely a Gentile God-fearer who attended synagogue.

Timothy and Silas coming allows Paul to devote himself full-time to preaching and teaching. Titius Justus' hospitality also immediately bears fruit for Paul: *"Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord, together with his entire household. And many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized."* Now, we have a real church forming, made up of Jews and Gentiles.

Still, Paul is afraid of the Jewish opponents and is discouraged that a mob will again attack and drive him from town. All of these people were a wonderful provision for Paul, but they weren't enough to ease his anxiety. He needed a special promise from God.

**Promise:** *And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, "Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people." And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them. – verses 9-11*

Now, the church was growing, but it was not yet very big. God tells Paul two key things:

1. No one will attack you to harm you.
2. I have many in this city who are my people.

These are both strong reassurances of God's sovereign rule, His control of human circumstances and of eternal salvation. He can promise Paul that no one will attack him to harm him because God is in control and knows all things. He can also tell Paul that "many in this city" belong to Him, even though they have not yet come to faith in Him, because He is the Lord of salvation and He knows His own and saves His own.

In times of weakness and fear, anxiety and uncertainty, it is certainly good to have God's people in our lives. God gives us each other for encouragement, comfort, mutual upbuilding in the Lord, practical provision of needs, etc. However, other people are not enough. Ultimately, we need to remember who God is and trust in His promises. God has not made the kind of specific promises to us that He made to Paul, but He is still just as sovereign, just as much in control of all things. Our real comfort comes from Him – who He is – and not ourselves or even each other.

#### **D. The Kingdom Comes in Such Ways**

After a year and a half of ministry and growth in the church, opposition arose again. It seems to have been triggered by the fact that Gallio was appointed as the proconsul for Achaia. Gallio was a famous Roman senator. His brother, Seneca, was a great philosopher and playwright and was personal tutor to the future emperor Nero.

Perhaps the Jewish leaders thought they could present their case effectively to Gallio because he was intelligent and well-read. Certainly, he would see how dangerous and ridiculous it was to teach that a man had been raised from the dead and was now the Savior and Lord.

*And so, “the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him before the tribunal, saying, “This man is persuading people to worship God contrary to the law.” But when Paul was about to open his mouth, Gallio said to the Jews, “If it were a matter of wrongdoing or vicious crime, O Jews, I would have reason to accept your complaint. But since it is a matter of questions about words and names and your own law, see to it yourselves. I refuse to be a judge of these things.” And he drove them from the tribunal. And they all seized Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the tribunal. But Gallio paid no attention to any of this.”*

While God had made a specific promise to Paul, it wasn't an eternal guarantee. The kingdom of God advances through the faithful proclamation of the Gospel, but it never advances unopposed. The true Gospel has always faced significant and usually irrational and stubborn opposition. Sometimes, the most violent opposition has come from professing Christians or other religious people, who have sometimes burned believers who preach the Biblical Gospel at the stake.

This is the way the kingdom advances. Some people think that if we are obedient to God and loving to our neighbors, as He commands, then people will love Christians and Christianity and the church. But that's not how it works in this world. We need to be thankful that we only face ridicule and social ostracism from some people and not anything more severe.

Pastor Wang Yi of Early Rain Covenant Church in China was sentenced to 9 years in a Chinese prison labor camp this past week, after being held in prison since December 9, 2018. Other God-honoring men and women around the world are facing even more serious threats every day.

### **Conclusion: What Are Our Priorities?**

As a church, as we begin 2020 and a new study in I Corinthians, we are given an opportunity to examine our priorities and how we define success. We are not called to be obnoxious, rude, offensive, or self-righteous. We are called to love our neighbors as ourselves. But we are also called to faithful Gospel witness in a world that often opposes the truth with irrational hatred.

We do not need to respond to the world's hatred with fear. We have the promise of God: *“I will never leave you nor forsake you.”* So we can confidently say,

*“The Lord is my helper;*

*I will not fear;*

*what can man do to me?”* – Hebrews 13:5-6, ESV

We may face times of discouragement, loneliness, fear, and anxiety. This is when we need each other and we need the promises of God more than ever.

How did the angry Jewish leaders respond when Gallio put them out of the tribunal? *“And they all seized Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the tribunal. But Gallio paid no attention to any of this.”*

And how does Paul open his letter to the Corinthians? *“Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes,*

*To the church of God that is in Corinth.”*

Sosthenes was beaten by the mob, but he got up and followed Jesus and visited Paul, and together they wrote this letter to the church. That's two synagogue leaders in a row, Crispus and Sosthenes, leaders of a synagogue that was violently opposed to the Gospel, who came to faith in Jesus and served His church faithfully. We never know how God may use us or what success He may grant us by His grace and for His glory!