

Dear Church
1 Corinthians 1:1-3

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We are so excited for this new sermon series on 1 Corinthians. Every year, 10-12 of our leaders on staff get together and pray and seek God's guidance for where he wants to lead us in our teaching. We take several hours, throw everything on a white board, and then see where there is alignment and unity. One person mentioned this idea. Two mentioned that idea. But eight people all mentioned this. Ten people all said this. Everyone in the room felt led to this.

When we did this several months ago, our entire team thought we needed to focus on things like unity, maturity, holiness, healthy relationships, sexuality and gender, and the gospel, and of course we wanted to teach on all of those things in a way that was 100% rooted and grounded in God's Word. We left that meeting and prayed more, and many of us noted almost every one of the themes we felt led to focus on is brought up and fleshed out in 1 Corinthians. So instead of dealing with each of those important topics in different series, we are going to work our way through the book of 1 Corinthians for the next nine months and allow God to speak powerfully to us through his Word in each of those vitally important areas. This is a book that I have been studying and diving into for over fifteen years. I love this book. This is my very first time getting to preach through it. I think God has so many incredible things to teach you and to teach us, to form and shape you and to form and shape us as a church through this. Let's pray and ask God to guide us!

We are going to jump in and read the first couple verses together:

Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, to the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 1:1-3)

Today we are going to talk about Paul, the man who wrote this letter, and the Corinthians, the recipients of this letter. We are going to learn about their history, their background, their relationship, how through Christ their stories came to intersect and overlap, and how this letter that Paul wrote to them is relevant for our lives today.

First, let's talk about Paul. Many of you have been in church a long time and are familiar with Paul. Others of you are newer to faith, or are here for the first time, so let's talk about who he is so we are all on the same page. Paul tells key parts of his life story in Acts and in 22:3 he says: "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia." Now when you first hear that Saul is from Tarsus, that may not mean a lot to you right away, but there's actually something incredibly important about this city. To help us understand it, I want us to go on a journey. Let's pull up a picture of where we are at today, at our Franklin Road location, and we are going to ask Google Maps to take us to Tarsus. (Please view the online sermon to see the map.) This is Saul's hometown. What is so important about this place is what it was known for. In the ancient Greek world, everyone knew where all the best philosophers spent their time: in Athens, the same city where Socrates and Aristotle and Plato lectured centuries before. But though all the best Greek thinkers in the world wanted to make it in Athens, where do you suppose they went to train—to learn philosophy, to learn logic, to learn rhetoric? The answer: Tarsus. Saul's hometown was actually called "the Athens of the East," which means that Saul grew up in the epicenter of Greek thought life. He was exposed to the very best Greek philosophical training in the entire world. That was his childhood.

As Saul grew older, he moved away from Tarsus to the city of Jerusalem. Let's take the journey there on Google maps. If Tarsus was the center for Greek thought life, Jerusalem was the center for Hebrew thought life. Saul didn't just spend time in Jerusalem; he was able to train under one of the greatest rabbis in all of Jewish history. He says, "I studied under Gamaliel and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors" (Acts 22:3). If you study Jewish history, you'll discover is that Gamaliel is one of only seven rabbis in Israel's 4,000-year history to be given the honorary title of "Rabbon." Saul studied under him.

So Saul not only had the opportunity to become a world class expert in Greek philosophy, he also had the opportunity to become a world class expert in theology. Here is what I want you to realize: in the first century there may not have been any other person on the planet who had the unique training and blend of interdisciplinary studies that Saul had. But he wasn't one of those dispassionate intellectual types who lived in an ivory tower and pontificated endlessly about one theory after another. Saul was one of the most intense, passionate men anyone had ever met. He was so intense, so passionate, that he was willing to go to any length, pay any price, to teach others and bring them to the same conclusions he had arrived at. That included arresting people who didn't believe what he believed—even overseeing the execution of people who didn't believe what he believed. In fact, "Saul began to destroy the church" (Acts 8:2). "Destroy" is the same word used in Greek to describe an animal tearing apart a carcass. Saul is doing incredible damage to the church.

That led to a time in his life when he was on his way to arrest and kill Christians. He described what happened on that journey:

"About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, 'Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?' 'Who are you, Lord?' I asked. 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,' he replied." (Acts 22:6-8)

This was his conversion experience. It wasn't like as a kid he dreamed about being an apostle. His dream was to eliminate the apostles. But then Jesus, a man who Paul knew for certain had died, appeared in resurrected, glorified form, and said not only am I alive; you need to stop persecuting me and start telling the world about me. Within a few days Paul was baptized and went into the Jewish synagogues and started telling people that Jesus is the Son of God. No one could believe it! They were dumbfounded! Isn't this the guy trying to stop people from believing in Jesus? Now he's telling us to believe in him. And guess what the Jews decided to do? Just as Saul had tried to kill converts to Christianity, the Jewish community came up with a plan to kill him. So he fled the city through a hole in the wall and before long, ended up going to Arabia, where he stayed for three years!

He went to the wilderness for 36 months. Many scholars say just like the disciples needed three years of following Jesus to prepare them for leadership, Paul also needed three years of being alone with the Lord. This was his preparation time. When he comes back from his time in the wilderness he meets with the leaders of the church, he preaches, but his preaching causes a commotion and people try to kill him, so he heads to his hometown of Tarsus, where he stays for nearly ten years. We know next to nothing about his life for that entire decade. But we can assume that God was teaching him, training him, sanctifying him, preparing him for the work that was to follow. I think that is an important part of his story that is so relevant for many of us today. Most of us are not good at patience. We get a dream, an idea, a vision for what God could do in our lives and we want it to happen tomorrow. We want to see progress and abundant fruit right away. How long did Paul have to wait? Thirteen years. But that time of preparation prepared him for incredible ministry for the rest of his life and changed world history. You can't rush the work of God. You have to let him dig deeply if you hope to be able to irrigate broadly.

After that time of preparation Paul went to a town called Antioch, let's take a Google trip there. Paul stays here for about a year. He's in a large, metropolitan city with a very influential church. This is actually the place where followers of Jesus were first called "Christians." Paul was an important part of their leadership team. One day, the Holy Spirit spoke and said it was time to send Paul out to do missionary work (Acts 13:2-3). So the church laid their hands on him, prayed for him, funded him financially, and set him off to preach the gospel to people who had never heard it before!

As a church, we do this very thing today. We have people who sense God has called them to go as missionaries to a place where there are either no or very few Christians. As a church we pray over them, we provide a large part of their funding, we send them off, and then we maintain an ongoing relationship with them as they report back about the work they are doing, the progress they are seeing, the help they need. We have sent people to several different countries in Asia, Africa, Central America—places where very few people have heard about Christ. We send them there to share with them. That's what this church in Antioch did for Paul.

Acts 13-14 tells us about the first trip, which we can see on this map. After Paul preached in seven different cities and led many people to Christ, this journey ends with him being stoned and left for dead. Fortunately, after the crowd left, Paul got up, regrouped and returned to Antioch. He told the church how the first missionary journey went and they were so excited they sent him out on another trip. This time, he not only visited the places he went on this first journey, but he also went to Philippi, the first missionary journey to a European city. He was placed in prison and escorted out of town. Then he went to Thessalonica where he had a very successful preaching ministry but was ultimately chased out of town. Next he went to Berea and taught the Word there, until he was chased out of town (are you catching a theme here?). Next Paul went to Athens where he preached to the intelligentsia of his day and actually won a few converts. And then the Lord led him to Corinth.

Corinth was one of the most important cities in the ancient world, but it's a city that a lot of people do not know much about. Let's go there on Google maps. Corinth is one of the most strategically located cities you will ever find. It sits on a four-mile stretch of land called an "isthmus," which connects northern Greece to southern Greece's Peloponnese peninsula. All trade and travel that went throughout Greece had to go through this narrow strength of land. But it wasn't only north / south land travel. It was east / west sea travel. Sailors hated, hated, traveling around the southern coast of Greece, known as the Cape of Maleas, because of how treacherous and dangerous it was. That is the very location where, in Homer's *Odyssey*, Odysseus gets blown off course and goes lost at sea for ten years. There was a well-known saying: "Let him who sails around the cape of Maleas write his own will." Instead of traveling around the southern part of Greece, sailors would dock their boat at Corinth, then all the cargo would be offloaded and transported four miles down the Diolkos (a paved trackway) to another boat waiting for them in the gulf of Corinth. This saved time and money, and it eliminated the risk of shipwreck. And the sailors all got 3-4 days off while their cargo was being transported. So Corinth became a major hub for all north / south and east / west cargo from the entire region.

In 146 BC, the city was captured by the Roman army and completely destroyed. But because it was such an important part of Julius Caesar's vision for the empire, he rebuilt the city in 44 B.C. The Romans established it as a Roman colony, meaning the people weren't subject to Roman rule with excessive taxes and foreign rulers—they were a part of Rome, with full citizenship and all the benefits that came with it. As they rebuilt the town, they centered it around temples to three Greek gods: Apollos, Aphrodite, and Asclepius.

Apollo was the god of prophecy (see the online sermon for a photo of his temple). It's fascinating that Paul talks about prophecy more in this letter to the Corinthians than any other letter he wrote—he's

writing to people who were obsessed with prophecy but needed to learn how to do it in a God-honoring way.

Another one of the temples was to Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love. Ancient historians said more than 1,000 slaves were donated to this temple, many of whom served as temple prostitutes. The people of this city and the frequent visitors to this city were “looking for love in all the wrong places.” It’s not strange that Paul writes to this church specifically about not joining your body with that of a temple prostitute, and that he takes an entire chapter to describe what love really looks like.

Another one of the temples was to Asklepeos, the god of medicine and healing. There was a school in Corinth where people came from around the world to learn how to treat patients. There was science to part of it, but there was also superstition to a lot of it as well. In the ancient world, if you were sick and needed healing, you would make a cast of the part of your body that was injured or sick, take it to the temple of the god whose favor you sought, and leave it there with a gift. You break your arm, it’s the cast of an arm. You have a bunion on your foot, it’s a cast of a foot. This is how it worked. Do you want to guess what body parts were represented in archeological finds in Corinth way more than any other? Private parts. There was so much sexual immorality in this city that archeologists can actually show they had STDs at a higher rate than any other city in the ancient world. An ancient playwright named Aristophanes said “to Corinthianize” literally meant “to commit sexual immorality.” It’s probably not surprising that it was to this city that Paul wrote a letter and spent time talking about holiness, about gender, about sexual purity.

And to this city that was built around temples, Paul wrote, “Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in your midst?” (1 Corinthians 3:16). A temple isn’t a place you go—it’s something you are! That radically changes your mindset, behavior, and lifestyle. It changes how you treat your body and what you do with your body (emphasis on personal). It changes how you treat your body and what you do with your body (emphasis on church).

The book of Acts gives us a little window into what happened when Paul got to Corinth:

Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks. When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah. But when they 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 innocent of it. 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. Crispus, the synagogue leader, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard Paul believed and were baptized. (Acts 18:4-8)

At first he preaches in the synagogue, but after a while, they get hostile and start abusing him. Paul says, “Ok, I told you the truth; if you don’t want to hear it, I’ll preach to the Gentiles in town.” He preaches, lots of people are baptized, and a house church springs up in the home of Titius Justice. Paul just assumed he was going to be chased out of the city like every other place he visited, but take a look at what happened next:

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 in Corinth for a year and a half [which is longer than he was able to stay in any other city on his missionary journeys to that point in his ministry], teaching them the word of God. (Acts 18:9-11)

Scholars debate what the phrase, “I have many people in this city” means. Some think it means that there are people in that town who have faith in God, and the Lord is going to turn their hearts to create open doors for Paul and the gospel. Others say that it is more likely to mean that God had many people in that town who were far from him, but he wanted them to become close to him, and they were going to become part of God’s family through Paul’s ministry in this town. I think both can be true at the same time. I think about the city where we live. God has strategically placed people of influence all over town. There are several people at our church who run businesses that have over 1,000 employees. They don’t just use that position to grow wealth and advance their legacy—they use that position to honor God in the work place and open doors for gospel opportunity for everyone they work with. There is a principal who attends our church. Once a month, he opens the doors of the school where he leads, after hours, and people from the community can pray through the school—pray over the hallways and lockers, the classrooms, the cafeteria where kids are building friendships. There are so many people who God has in this city, leveraging their influence to open doors for the gospel, because there are many more people in this city who are far from God who God wants to bring close to him. For many of you, that is why you are here. You were sent to this city, given influence at work, with neighbors, in your community, and the purpose is to be able to point people to Christ. What’s true in Corinth 2000 years ago is true in Indianapolis today.

Paul got to stay in this major metropolitan hub for a year and a half—18 months—preaching the gospel, making disciples, and growing this church. He got to spend more time with them than anyone else in his ministry up to this point. Ultimately, after 18 months, God sent him to other towns to preach and teach. And about three years later, after he hadn’t been in Corinth for a while, a lot of issues began to surface in the life of the congregation. There were fights about which leader they should follow, issues with sexual sin (a man sleeping with his step mother), people going to the temple prostitutes, people in the church marrying people who were non-Christians, people coming to the worship gathering and getting drunk on communion, people using their spiritual gifts in such a way as to draw attention to themselves rather than to build up the body of Christ—so many issues. Paul wrote this letter to them to remind them of the gospel message, to draw their attention to Jesus, and to help them learn the truth God speaks into every one of the issues they were facing as a congregation. They were just going through the issues that hit people in life, and they needed Paul to write to them, with godly wisdom, with the relational knowledge and influence he had because of his time with them, and speak into each of these issues.

Paul wraps up the intro to his letter by saying this: “To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours.” Yes, Paul wrote this letter to the Corinthians, but what did he say: It’s also to “all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” That’s us. Paul is writing to us to help us know what it means to be God’s holy people. To believe that Jesus is Lord and to live as if he’s Lord. To be holy people, people who live lives. The things they were facing then are so similar to what we are encountering today! They lived in the most influential city in their region, the crossroads of Greece. Just like them, we live in the most influential city in the region. Corinth may have been the crossroads of Greece; our town is literally called “the crossroads of America.”

The Corinthians needed to be reminded about:

- How to live as holy people in a pluralistic, idolatrous society.
- How to prioritize unity in the midst of disagreements and division.
- God’s wisdom on sexual immorality, gender roles, marriage, and healthy relationships.
- The importance of using their spiritual gifts to build up the body.
- The centrality of Christ and the power of the gospel.

The issues that they faced are so similar to what we are facing today. Through Paul, God spoke to them and gave them everything they needed to grow in Christ and honor him. Through Paul, God is going to speak to us and give us everything we need to grow in Christ and honor him.