

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Introduction to 2 Corinthians

2 Corinthians 1:1-2

47-1

It is our joy today to embark upon a brand new adventure in the study of 2 Corinthians. Take your Bible, if you will, and let's open to this beloved and rich letter from the Apostle Paul to the often troubled church at Corinth...2 Corinthians. And for this morning, it will be enough for us just to look at the first two verses which is the salutation to this great letter, 2 Corinthians chapter 1 verses 1 and 2.

"Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the church of God which is at Corinth with all the saints who are throughout Achaia: GRace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

In the ancient book of Job a man named Eliphaz reflects on the difficulty of life in this corrupted world. And he says, "For man is born for trouble as sparks fly upward." In other words, just as inevitably as the sparks coming off the fire go up, so man has trouble. Job himself echoed the same view of life later in the book, chapter 14 verse 1, when he said, "Man who is born of woman is short lived and full of trouble." And I suppose there hasn't been anybody who has ever lived who wouldn't echo the sentiments of both Eliphaz and Job. Life is just filled with trouble, struggle, problems, hurts, pain, disappointment, disillusionment, unfulfillment, despair. And very honestly it sometimes feels as if God is not really there.

The psalmist pensively asks the question in the tenth Psalm, "Why dost Thou stand afar off, O Lord? Why dost Thou hide Thyself in times of trouble?" And, in fact, the same sentiment finds expression in a whole Psalm, Psalm 88. "O Lord, the God of my salvation, I have cried out by day and in the night before me, let my prayer come before Thee, incline Thine ear to my cry, for my soul has had enough troubles and my life has drawn near to Sheol. I am reckoned among those who go down to the pit. I have become like a man without strength, forsaken among the dead, like the slain who lie in the grave, whom Thou dost remember no more and they are cut off from Thine hand. Thou has put me in the lowest pit, in dark places, in the depths. Thy wrath has rested upon me and Thou hast afflicted me with all Thy waves. Thou hast removed my acquaintances far from me. Thou hast made me an object of loathing to them. I am shut up and cannot go out. My eye has wasted away because of affliction. I have called upon Thee every day, O Lord, I have spread out my hands to Thee. Wilt Thou perform wonders for the dead? Will the departed spirits rise and praise Thee? Will Thy loving kindness be declared in the grave, Thy faithfulness in Abaddon? Will Thy wonders be made known in the darkness and Thy righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?"

In other words, if You let me die what good will I be to You in terms of ministry and praise?

"But I, O Lord, have cried out to Thee for help and in the morning my prayer comes before Thee. O Lord, why dost Thou reject my soul? Why dost Thou hide Thy face from me?"

Life is full of trouble and sometimes it feels like God doesn't really care. But He does care. Eliphaz knew that. In the very same chapter in which Eliphaz spoke about trouble, he also spoke about God's care, about how God steps in to intervene in our trouble. This is what he said. "Behold how happy is the man whom God reprove, so do not despise the discipline of the Almighty for He inflicts pain and gives relief. He wounds and His hands also heal. From six troubles He will deliver you, even in seven evil will not touch you. In famine He will redeem you from death and in war from the power of the sword. You will be hidden from the scourge of the tongue. Neither will you be afraid of violence when it comes, you will laugh at violence and famine. Neither will you be afraid of wild beasts for you will be in league with the stones of the field and the beasts of the field will be at peace with you. And you will know that your tent is secure, and you will visit your abode and fear no loss. You will know also that your descendants will be many and your offspring as the grass of the earth. You will come to the grave in full vigor, like the stacking of grain in its season." And then he says this, "Behold this, we have investigated it, thus it is, hear it and know for yourself."

I've looked into this...says Eliphaz...and I'm telling you there are times of affliction but God always intervenes. And so the psalmist echoes exactly the same sentiment again and again and again throughout the Psalms...there is the affirmation that God will come and save His people, no matter how difficult the trouble might be. You find it in Psalm 22 and Psalm 31 and 34 and 39 and 46 and 54 and you find it in Psalm 71 and 81 and 91 and 107 and many other places. In fact, in one way or another the phrase runs over and over that says, "For He has delivered me from all my trouble."

Now you say, "Why are you talking about all of this? What does this have to do with the salutation to 2 Corinthians?"

Just this, as Paul writes he writes from a context of trouble. In fact, the trouble is so severe from the physical side that just prior to writing this letter, verse 8 says, "We despaired even of life." And verse 9 says, "We had the sentence of death within ourselves." Verse 10 says, "We were in a great peril of death." Just prior to the writing of this letter the Apostle Paul's life was on the line to the degree that he gave up all hope. As the beloved Apostle begins to pen this magnificent epistle, he is just escaping from the most life-threatening, severe trouble imaginable and he has just been wonderfully, gloriously, amazingly delivered by the Lord. And as he speaks of that deliverance, he says in verse 9 at the end, that it comes by the hand of God who raises the dead. It took resurrection power to get us out of this.

He knows what trouble is. He knows the pain of ministry. Certainly he suffered it. And in this letter he reiterates it. Over in chapter 11 he says in verse 23, "I was in far more labors and far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. Five times I received thirty-nine lashes...he says...from the Jews, three times beaten with rods, once stoned, three times shipwrecked, a night and day in the deep." And then in verse 26, frequently he's been in danger from rivers and robbers and countrymen and Gentiles, in the city, in the wilderness, on the sea, among false brethren. Verse 27, "I have been in labor and hardship through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food and cold and exposure."

From the physical side the man knew pain and trouble beyond anything we could ever conceive of. The Apostle Paul knew physical pain. But there was something even more painful than that. Chapter 11 and verse 28 he says, "Apart from such external things there is the daily pressure, the daily tribulation, the daily suffering, the daily trouble upon me of concern for all the churches."

People inflicted much more pain than rocks, than whips, than sticks. People had the capability to hurt and wound and disappointment and disillusion. The real trouble was the trouble of trying to deal with the churches. And never was that more evident than in the case of the Corinthian church. They were a high-maintenance bunch. They took a tremendous amount of work. And it seemed as though it was always two steps forward and three steps back. With the Corinthian church as with some others, but particularly with the Corinthian church, he had to face rebellion, disloyalty, dishonesty, immorality, unfaithfulness, inadequate help, ineptness, ignorance, pride, at all levels.

His own narrow escape from death was one kind of external trouble, but it came and it went. The Corinthian trouble came and stayed. And he writes this epistle in the vortex of trouble. Just narrowly escaping from death, that burden having been for the moment relieved, he is now left with the pressure, the concern for this church that he loves.

If you take the first eleven verses as kind of an introduction which they really are, you find in them five different words to describe trouble. From verse 3 on there are five words describing trouble. But there is one word that is used ten times and that is the word "comfort." He describes his trouble five different ways, and then ten times refers to the comfort that he finds in God.

So while it must be admitted that when he writes the letter he realizes there's trouble, at the same time he also is experiencing tremendous comfort. The reason he feels the trouble is because he knows the problems. The reason he feels the comfort is because he knows that there are some people who have gotten into line with God's way and God's Word. In fact, in chapter 7 verse 6 he refers to God who comforts the depressed, comforting us...that is he and Timothy...by the coming of Titus. Not only by his coming but also by the comfort with which he was comforted in you as he reported to us your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me so that I rejoiced even more. He has just gotten good word from Titus who made a visit to Corinth and Titus has told him the majority are responding to your first letter. They're falling in line with God's Word. They're doing what they were supposed to be doing. Things are turning around. It's a good day there. And so he was experiencing comfort.

At the same time he knew the battle wasn't over. The problems were still there. The immorality was still there. The corrupt culture was still there. The demonic assaults were still there. The false apostles who tried to undermine the whole church, who tried to deny Paul's apostolic authority were still there. The people who had been enamored and deluded by the false apostles were still there. And all of the potential for disloyalty and rebellion and the smoldering smoke of the mutiny to sort of ignite itself again was still there and so as he writes he is very aware of his trouble but he is at the same time very aware that God provides comfort. And so when he begins the epistle, you don't feel so much the trouble, you feel the comfort.

In fact, from verse 3 to 11 you'll find the word "comfort" repeated ten times. God has shown His faithful and powerful arm in all of Paul's difficulties and Paul knows that God is there to comfort and strengthen in the midst of this and so his heart is in a rejoicing mode. In fact, he launches really in verse 3 with the little phrase "blessed is God." Blessed is God. He starts on a positive note. I believe that should be taken in the indicative rather than the imperative. Literally, "Blessed is God." It's praise, folks. Blessed, eulogetos from which you get eulogy. It means to speak well of. When you die they do a eulogy at your grave, they speak well of you. This is used eight times in the New Testament, this word, and only of God, never of anybody else. It is used very frequently in the Septuagint, the Old Testament in Greek, to translate the Hebrew term barak, a very common Old

Testament term, barak, and the New Testament word that is used there is this eulogetos.

The Jews had eighteen benedictions in the synagogue service, eighteen of them. They all began baraketa(?), blessed is God, blessed art You, are You, O Lord, actually...baraketa and then the reference to the Lord Himself. All eighteen began the same way. So this is a very Jewish format, "Blessed is God." The first of those eighteen goes like this, "Blessed are You, O Lord, our God, and God of our fathers, God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob, the great mighty and revered God, the Most High God who bestows loving kindnesses and possesses all things, who remembers the pious deeds of the patriarchs and in love will bring a Redeemer to their children's children for Thy namesake." That's benediction number one.

So here the Apostle Paul is borrowing from his Jewish heritage this expression that identifies the blessedness of God, that speaks well of God. He's not questioning God because he's just escaped death. He's not questioning God because this church in Corinth seems to struggle so greatly. He is blessing God. He is extolling and exalting God. Here he makes this baraketa statement distinctively Christian by not saying "blessed art Thou, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob," but he says, "blessed art Thou, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." Distinctively Christian benediction.

And so he starts this letter with a heart of joy and gratitude and thanksgiving in the midst of our afflictions, he says.

Now this first opening section is amazing, and we won't get to verses 3 to 11 until next week. But it is an amazing section because it shows a man who has every reason to be distraught and despairing in his trouble but who is filled with joy and praise and gratitude because of who his God is. We'll get to that next time.

But as he opens, his heart is positive and rejoicing. And you feel that even in the salutation. Everything there is upbeat. He speaks of his apostleship, the sovereignty of God, his fellowship with Timothy, the church of Corinth as belonging to God. It's not a false church, it's a true one. And then he speaks of those folks as saints or holy ones throughout the whole region. And then he offers them that beautiful, magnificent Christian greeting, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

Now, I want to spend a few moments this morning just getting you a little feeling for this book and it's hard to do this because there's so much been written on this. I've been reading and reading and reading for days and even weeks on this, and to try to condense all this down and say what should be said is a great challenge. But let me see if I can give you some perspective to sort of pull you in to the nature of this tremendous epistle.

First Corinthians, let's compare it for a moment. First Corinthians is a letter devoted to the problems of a church. Second Corinthians is a letter devoted to the personal life of a man. First Corinthians is Paul telling the Corinthian church what they need to be. Second Corinthians is Paul telling the Corinthian church what he is. Very personal. First Corinthians is a letter of correction. Second Corinthians is a letter of personal testimony. First Corinthians is written to a church being corrected for greater usefulness. Second Corinthians is a look at a man being strengthened for greater usefulness. Second Corinthians is the most personal, the most open-hearted look into the soul of Paul in all of his letters. It is really rich. One writer says, "It is the cross section of a genuine

Christian." If you could take a genuine Christian and just cut him down the middle and look at the cross section on a spiritual Xray, this is what you'd see.

It teaches us...it teaches us much. You will not be the same. It will transform your life, I promise you. But it will teach you not by precept, and not by law, and not by principle, and not by reasoned argument, it will teach you by example. This epistle will mentor you. It will disciple you as you see Paul revealed.

And by the way, it is the fifth epistle that he wrote chronologically out of the thirteen that he penned, this came at the fifth point. It is written on the eve of the last decade of his ministry, he had three decades of ministry, twenty years are behind him, he stands on the brink of the last ten. He is in his late fifties, he served Christ for twenty years. He's been at it long enough to understand ministry and long enough to have a deep and abiding relationship to Christ. The approach of the letter is not historical. It is not theological, it is not even ecclesiological, the approach is biographical. It just opens him up and we see what the inside of a devoted man of God looks like. Unlike so many of his other letters, it doesn't present systematic ordered arguments, it doesn't even present doctrine as such, although it alludes to it everywhere. But it gives us passion. It gives us the heart of the man, his experience with God personally.

In all of my reading I came across a little book on 2 Corinthians written by Dr. Roy Lauren who used to be pastor of the First Baptist Church of Eagle Rock. And when I was a small boy with my family I attended that church and he was my pastor, I remember him so well. And in his comments on 2 Corinthians, this is what he wrote. "Out of the maelstrom of human passions rises the figure of a real and genuine Christian. Here life is presented objectively and realistically. Here is a Christian realism that is brutally frank and meticulously honest. It is fearless to face any life situation. It is unafraid, unabashed, and unashamed. What transpires in Paul's Christian experience is the outworking of the great truths of all Christian experience," end quote. This is a look at a real Christian in operation.

And even though it's Paul, it's also for us. With all of its wonderful insights into Christian living, Christian discipleship and spiritual triumph, it belongs to all of us. And it's like us, too, he is triumphing in the middle of trouble. His heart has been broken by this Corinthian church and that's why he wrote 1 Corinthians. And it had an impact, but not yet fully. Things aren't what they should be yet and thus there is the necessity for this second letter. Oh the general response to the first epistle was good, and Paul was glad for that. That's what Titus came to tell him. But there were still those undermining Paul and his authority and his gospel and the Lord and the Word. And frankly it could undo everything he had done in the eighteen months he was there and everything since.

So, in this letter you're going to see a triumphant Christian. You're going to see a victorious Christian. But you're also going to see a man who is feeling pain, concern and agony over his church.

No comment on the mixture of these two things can improve on that by Hodge, who many years ago wrote these words, "That the Corinthians had received his former letter with a proper spirit, that it brought them to repentance, led them to excommunicate the incestuous person and call forth on the part of the larger portion of the congregation the manifestation of the warmest affections for the Apostle relieved his mind from a load of anxiety and filled his heart with gratitude to God. On the other hand, the increased boldness and influence of the false teachers, the perverting errors which they inculcated and the frivolous and calumnious charges which they brought against himself filled

him with indignation. This accounts for the abrupt transitions from one subject to another, the sudden changes of tone and manner which characterized this epistle. When writing to the Corinthians as a church obedient, affectionate and patient...obedient, affectionate and penitent, there is no limit to his tenderness and love. His great desire seems to be to heal the temporary breach which had occurred between them and to assure his readers that all was forgiven and forgotten and that his heart was entirely theirs. But when he turns to the wicked designing corrupters of the truth among them, there is a tone of severity to be found in no other of his writings, no not even in the epistle to the Galatians. Erasmus compares this epistle to a river which sometimes flows in a gentle stream, sometimes rushes down as a torrent, bearing all before it. Sometimes spreading out like a placid lake, sometimes losing itself, as it were, in the sand and breaking out in its fullness in some unexpected place. Though perhaps the least methodical of Paul's writings, it is among the most interesting of his letters as bringing out the man before the reader and revealing his intimate relations to the people for whom he labored."

Now Paul knows things aren't all they should be, and yet he doesn't want to start on a negative tone. The first epistle was negative enough. He wants to start on a positive note and thus he begins by blessing God with a heart of thanksgiving.

Before we actually look at that blessing, and we'll do that next time from verses 3 to 11, just briefly follow his salutation because it contains some very rich things.

"Paul, an Apostle of Christ Jesus." By the way, nothing ever altered Paul's sense of duty. Nothing ever caused him to deviate from his responsibility because he always saw himself as a messenger sent by Christ Jesus. He understood the loftiness of his duty. He understood the task of representing the Lord as Savior. He was not his own, he had been bought with a price redemptively and he had been on his way to Damascus to persecute Christians and was transformed into a sent messenger belonging to the Lord Jesus Christ. He knew that. It was cataclysmic. It was supernatural, dramatic. He never wavered. He never queried the reality of his apostleship, though he did say in 1 Corinthians 15 that he was the least of all apostles and not worthy to be an apostle. Nonetheless in his own time and unique way he was called by the risen Christ.

And inevitably when anybody wanted to attack his churches, the first thing they attacked was Paul's credentials. And they would say, "Well he certainly wasn't one of the original Twelve and he's this Johnny-Come-Lately kind of guy with a self-appointed ministry. And inevitably whenever false teachers came along they would attack his credentials. And so when you read his epistles over and over and over, he starts by reasserting that he is Paul an apostle called by Christ Jesus. He never wavers on that. And that is substantially foundational for everything that he writes because there is no New Testament yet for them to read. They must count on him as the Apostle of God and here the truth he speaks as that which is the Word of the living God. And so he has to reaffirm simply, clearly, poignantly and directly his apostolic credentials and he will do that even in more depth later in the epistle.

What had happened in Corinth was similar to what happened elsewhere. False apostles came in, false teachers, false prophets, the first thing they did was deny Paul's apostolic authority. What he said you can't trust, he's a self-appointed man, he's not authenticate, he's not for real. And they would undermine his credibility and then they would begin to attack his doctrine.

But Paul, as I said, was assured and bold whenever his calling and ministry was challenged that the

reality was he was an Apostle, an Apostle of Christ Jesus, an Apostle meaning a sent one, a messenger not by personal achievement, not by educational requirement, not by ecclesiastical dictum, but he says by divine appointment, and he adds by the will of God...by the will of God.

Clearly if you read Paul's conversion account in Acts 9, or if you read his reiteration of it in Acts 22, particularly if you read what he says in Acts 26. And I might just briefly read that to you, starting in verse 15. He tells about his conversion and he says, "Who art Thou, Lord? And the Lord said I am Jesus whom you're persecuting." And then Jesus said this to him, "Arise, stand on your feet, for this purpose I have appeared to you to appoint you a minister and a witness not only to the things which you've seen but also to the things in which I will appear to you, delivering you from the Jewish people and from the Gentiles to whom I am sending you to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light, and from the dominion of Satan to God, in order that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me."

In other words, there is his calling. Acts 26:15 to 18. He says it was by the will of God...not a church council, not a man, God Himself. He had been unwillingly assaulted by God on the Damascus Road and brought to faith, transformed from the leading persecutor of Christians to their greatest advocate and teacher, as well as the supreme gospel preacher to the lost. So he reasserts his own credentials, the people must listen, he is God's representative. He is the messenger of Jesus Christ. He brings a word that is not his own.

And then he adds, "Timothy, our brother." Please, would you notice he makes it clear by what he doesn't say that Timothy doesn't stand with him as an Apostle. Timothy is not an Apostle. The fact that he calls him "our brother" should make it clear. There were Twelve, Judas' place being taken by Matthias, plus one, Paul...and that is it. Timothy is called a brother, not an Apostle.

But certainly Timothy is a cherished brother. I don't know if you're aware of this but Paul wrote thirteen epistles. Timothy is mentioned in ten of them. Timothy appears in the greeting of six of them, and two of them were written to him. He's a very dominant person in the life and ministry of Paul. Paul met him, you remember, back in chapter 16 of the book of Acts in Derbe and Lystra...found him to be a very gifted and capable and dedicated young man from a very godly family whose mother and grandmother were very, very faithful Christians. He came from a Jewish and Gentile background which suited him for both worlds. And Paul found in him a young man in to whom he could pour his life, a man he could mentor and disciple and become partners with and ultimately turn the baton of ministry over to. In fact, when Paul wrote the first letter to Corinthian, the Corinthian church, he told him he was going to send Timothy to them, chapter 4 verse 17, chapter 16 verses 10 and 11. He said I'm going to send Timothy to check on you.

Why Timothy? Well he said because Timothy will bring you in to remembrance of all my ways. He's a carbon-copy of me, he's a clone. Furthermore, Timothy was there when Paul founded the church. In Acts 18 you have the record of the founding of the church at Corinth. It tells how the Apostle Paul went into the synagogue and there he met Aquila and Priscilla because they were in the same trade, making tents. He got acquainted with them. And then Paul rose and began to teach and preach the gospel in the synagogue, as was his custom...Acts 18 says. The Jews blasphemed and mocked and wouldn't listen. So Paul shook the dust off his garment, which was a sort of a physical demonstration of rejection. I want anything ...any residue of you that's on me off of me, I'm rejecting you.

And then it says he left the synagogue and went next door. He didn't go very far. He went to the

house of Titus Justus, another Titus, and there constantly he preached and taught the Word of God. There were no windows in those days, folks. And if the Apostle Paul was preaching and teaching next door to the synagogue, you can believe everybody in the synagogue heard everything he was saying. So he said he's turning his back on the Jews, but he didn't really go very far. His heart ached for them. And chapter 18 of the book of Acts says, "Crispus, the leader of the synagogue believed and his entire household." That's how the church was born. And then it says many others believed and were baptized. And Paul stayed there, it says, in chapter 18 verse 11, for a year and a half. Timothy was with him and so was Silas.

So they know Timothy. Timothy would have been there from the very beginning, and a beloved brother indeed. And in the 1 Corinthian letter Paul said, "I'm sending him back. It's very likely that Paul did just that. We don't have any historical data. Sent Timothy back and he would have had a recent encounter with him. We don't know anything about it. We don't know if he got there. We don't know what happened when he got there. We don't have any record of that. But assuming that he got there, maybe they mistreated him. Paul, you remember, when he wrote said treat him right, treat him carefully, treat him lovingly, treat him kindly because..chapter 16 verse 10 of the first letter...he's doing the Lord's work as also I am, don't look down on him and send him on the way in peace back to me, treat him right. Whether they did, I don't know. No one does. But if they mistreated him, it's wonderful that he includes his name here because it would have said, "He holds no bitterness, he holds no grudge." He is mutually our brother. He has forgiven you if Timothy had limited success. On the other hand, maybe he went and there was indifference and he just didn't have the kind of success he wanted and maybe he failed to be all that he should have been and things didn't go very well as they had...as Paul had hoped they had...might have gone. And maybe he had to come with a rod. Remember Paul said...I may come with a rod myself, if you don't shape up. Maybe it was tough for Timothy and he mentions him here again to show that whatever assumed breach in their relationship might have been in their minds was not reality and Timothy is indeed Paul's brother and their brother.

On the other hand, Timothy may have been flatly rejected. And in that case Paul puts him in this verse to let them know that when he does come he comes as the brother of the Apostle and he bears the Apostle's message. And you better listen to him.

Whether it was good news, or good news and bad news, or whatever happened, the inclusion of Timothy here would...would smooth over whatever residue might have been left from Timothy's recent visit. Titus, as I told you earlier, did go and return to Paul with word. We're not sure whether Timothy ever got there, we don't have any indication, perhaps he did.

Then in his customary fashion, he says this, "To the church of God which is at Corinth with all the saints who are throughout Achaia." In ancient times they always put the addressee at the beginning of the letter, so you always knew to whom it was written. You didn't have to go the last page, fumbling through the sheets to find out who it's from...put it up front, as his own name and then immediately the addressee's connected in the same verse.

So he is writing here to the church of God. It's not a human association of people with common religious beliefs. It is a community of those who share common eternal life and it belongs to God. Acts 20:28, God purchased it with the blood of Jesus Christ.

So here is this community that belongs to God. The church is always the church of God. The true

church belongs to God, not to men, not to denominations or associations or fellowships, but to God. He bought every member with the blood of Jesus Christ.

Now this little church was in the city of Corinth. The city of Corinth at this time had about a half a million people. We don't know how large the church was, but it would have been very small in comparison. The city of Corinth was a desperately wicked place. It was in a region known as Achaia. And he adds that this letter is to benefit not just the church at Corinth but all the saints, those who...that's a term for Christians, separated ones, it means, separated unto God. He calls the saints...he calls the Corinthians saints in the first letter, 1 Corinthians 1:2. We are all saints because we have been set apart from sin unto God. And he says for all the believers, not just in Corinth but throughout Achaia. We don't know where they were scattered. There was a church in Cenchrea which was a few miles down the road because we know Phoebe was a deacon there, from Romans 16:1. There may have been other small groups of Christians here and there.

Apparently Athens was not considered a part of Achaia, though it was certainly in that Peloponnesus piece of land because of some statements that are made elsewhere in Paul's epistles. In 1 Corinthians 16:15 he says that, brethren, you know the household of Stephanas, they were the first fruits of Achaia. If the house of Stephanas at Corinth was the first fruits in Achaia, what about the people who were converted in Athens before that? According to Acts 17:34, so we would conclude then that Paul is not here referring particularly to the city of Athens, which sort of was a place all on its own. Athens, some people were converted. But outside Athens in the remaining part of Achaia, the first convert was the family of Stephanas, and this is a letter addressed to all believers in that region.

Now let me give you just a little background very quickly. You need this to in order to get any kind of a grip on what's going on in this letter. Today Corinth is a small town. I was there this summer. It is a wonderfully beautiful spot. But is a small insignificant little town that has no present-day value in terms of any significance, but has some historical value for obvious reasons. It is a tremendous archaeological site where they've uncovered all this great history. You can walk through Corinth much as it was in the day of Paul, the main street, the various places are there, or pieces of them are there. It's a remarkable place.

To show you where it is, the great bulk of the land of Greece swings down to a tiny little neck four miles across, and then bulges out to a huge piece of land known as the Peloponnesus. To go around that Peloponnesus is 250 very difficult miles by ship. Corinth was right on that neck. On the western part is the gulf of Corinth, on the eastern part is the gulf...what is called the Saronic Gulf. ON the Saronic Gulf was Cenchrea where the church was, and on the Corinth Gulf was a city called Lechaem. In the middle, or near the middle was Corinth. So everybody going north and south from the great land mass of Greece down to the Peloponnesus had to go through that area, so it was the center of trade.

Sailors used to say no sailor sails around the Peloponnesus without writing his will. So to have to go all the way around that thing was a very long and arduous and difficult task, and so what the boats would do would be pull into the Saronic Gulf or the Corinthian Gulf, get out of the water and they would carry them using slaves across the four miles of land. It was cheaper. But what you had there was this crisscrossing of all these people coming through the city of Corinth and it swelled to a half a million people, became cosmopolitan. There were the Greeks and there were the Romans and there were the Jews and there were the Near Eastern cultures and they were all represented. In 146 B.C.

the Greeks had been conquered and it was a hundred years before it was rebuilt by Julius Caesar, became a Roman colony and then from the year 46 when Caesar built it, it began to swell into the life of Christ's period and then into the time of the Apostles until there was a city of a half a million people.

It had a huge acropolis. In fact the whole population could get up there and be protected from enemies. It had a temple to Aphrodite, the goddess of love. There were hundreds and hundreds, maybe thousands of priestesses who were prostitutes who came down the mountain and plied their prostitution religion in the city of Corinth...so much so that the Greek verb corinthianize means to go to bed with a prostitute, represents gross immorality and debauchery.

The city became known for fornication, idolatry, adultery, effeminacy, homosexuality, stealing, covetousness, drunkenness, reviling and swindling...the very things that Paul says in chapter 6 of the first letter the people used to do. It was really a wicked, wicked place.

The church had fallen victim to this existing wickedness. And then overrun with factions and worldly philosophies and notorious immorality and lawsuits between Christians and abuses of liberty and offenses against each other. And the desecration of the Lord's table and hassles over singleness and marriage and sex outside marriage, and confusion regarding the resurrection. And it was all just piling in on the church. In the midst of all of that Paul, of course, had been used by God to plant the church. The church was growing. And in came the false teachers and attacked Paul's authority, and attacked everything he taught. So here they are in the milieu of this wickedness and they're not sure who to trust and who's telling them the right things. This is the trouble.

This dear man had come there on his second missionary journey, been preaching and teaching in Macedonia for some time, from Philippi where he ministered, first of all, in Europe, he had gone to Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens and finally come to Corinth in Acts 18, and God used him to plant that church. He stayed a year and a half. He left and it wasn't long after he was gone that the roof started to cave in.

Some time around 53 or 54 A.D. he wrote 1 Corinthians. The letter was generally well received, but there were some who were still undermining his ministry. They were calling him a false apostle. They were doing everything they could to destroy his work. And so the first letter accomplished some things, but not everything. Paul was insulted and he was attacked and he was grieved.

The Corinthians needed to be rebuked for their disloyalty to God's servant and God's truth. The money for the poor saints in Jerusalem needed to be collected. So Paul decided to write a letter and send it with Titus. And this letter was a strong rebuke. He wrote it probably in the summer of 54. This letter is lost. Commentators call it "The Severe Letter." We don't have it.

There was even a letter before that we don't have...the very first letter he wrote, referred to in 1 Corinthians 5:9 in which he rebuked them for their immorality. So you have letter number one, sometime after he left, probably soon after he left. First Corinthians doesn't come till three years later. Soon after he left came the letter on immorality which we don't have, we have a reference to it. Then came 1 Corinthians, then came a second lost letter, rebuking them again. Titus took that. He came back, gave the report in chapter 7. And here came the last letter.

Some people are still sympathetic to the false apostles. Some are still victims of sin. And it's out of this mixed emotion, gratitude for those who have responded and concern for those who haven't that he writes this letter. And he says the common greeting, which needs no comment, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Grace is God's favor. Peace is one of its benefits. And he wishes them God's grace and God's peace.

In conclusion. No matter how hard the work of a messenger of Christ might be, no matter how trying and troublesome the fellowship of the church might be, no matter how weak and sinful the people might be, no matter how much turmoil and distress comes and goes, we are called to be faithful and to give all we have in the service of Christ. That's what you're going to see in this letter from the heart...remembering that our God and His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, has given us the richness of the promise that the work we do is His, the people we serve are His, the strength we need is His and the glory in the end belongs to Him.

Father, we thank You for letting us get started in this letter, so full and rich and loaded with truth about what it is to be a real servant. May we all become more faithful because of what we learn from the heart of Paul. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

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