



# GOOD WORD LESSONS

3rd Quarter, 2026

## Abstract

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## Paul's Ministry in Corinth:

Read for This Week's Study: *1 Cor. 1:1, Gal. 1:1, Acts 17:16-34, 1 Cor. 5:9-11, Acts 18:4-10, 2 Cor. 2:4.*

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**Memory Text:** "One night the Lord said to Paul in a vision, 'Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no one will lay a hand on you to harm you, for there are many in this city who are my people' " (*Acts 18:9, 10, NRSV*).

**An Opening Question:** "Why do you think Paul went to the ancient city of Corinth in fear and trembling?"

Hello, and welcome to Good Word. I am David Thomas, your host for the next 13 weeks. Over the next 13 weeks, we will be looking at the Apostle Paul's letters to the Corinthians, letters that will give us ample opportunity to do a lot of thinking and talking about church!

I am pleased to have two conversation partners, Carl Cosaert and Mike Barnett.

Let's begin by talking a bit about letters. Why do people write letters? Usually, it is because they have something to say and cannot be present to say it in person. That was the case with Paul's letters to the church in Corinth. He had heard from some distance of various goings on in the Corinthian church and therefore felt it necessary to write to them. We know Paul wrote at least three letters to the Corinthians, maybe even four. The New Testament has two of them, maybe three as some people believe that part of 2 Corinthians is actually made up of the third letter that somehow got incorporated into the writings we have.

We should also talk a bit about the ancient city of Corinth. In the Apostle Paul's day, it was a thriving city made wealthy mostly by its general commerce, shipbuilding, and ceramics. It was an important financial center, too. But Corinth was also known for its rampant sexual immorality to the point the name Corinth was a byword for lasciviousness. Corinth also had a

lot of religious activity with shrines all over the place resulting in what Paul and other Christians would have seen as blatant idolatry. One can only imagine the effect of all this public immorality and idolatry on the lives of Corinth's citizens, including, as we will see, those who became Christians.

According to the biblical record, Paul came from Athens to Corinth "in fear and trembling," Determining to know nothing among them "save Jesus Christ and him crucified." There are many commentators who think this fear is because of his attempts at arguing with the philosophers in Athens resulted in a failed ministry. Others think it is because of the fear of doing well in a new place. I tend to agree with the second opinion.

There are a lot of things to talk about here:

- Paul describes himself as an apostle, one called by God. This matter of calling is a very important one not only in the life of Paul, but also in the lives of all Christians. A sense of God's calling provides not only a sense of purpose, but also the resilience necessary to persevere even when hard times come. It can be said that Christians experience several callings from God:
  - A call to salvation that goes out to all humans.
  - A call to service that goes to all Christians.
  - A call to a special task that goes to some Christians.
  - A call to a place of work.
  - A call to enter relationships, some of which are temporary, that result in someone coming to a knowledge of the gospel.
- It is amazing that Paul refers to the believers in Corinth, in spite of all their troubles and woes, as "saints." In light of this, how shall we define what a saint is?
- It is touching to read the comment the Lord made to Paul, to the effect that God would be with him "for there are many in this city who are my people." (Acts 18:10). What can we say about God's desire to redeem humans even those who live in unsavory situations!
- One of the most interesting things to think about when thinking about the church in Corinth, is the various kinds of trouble that were

to be found in full flower within the congregation! Can you list them? What constitutes a congregation? At what point is a congregation no longer a Christian one? Do you think the Corinthian church, were it to be in existence today, would be accepted into a conference of Christian churches, or would they be disbanded as being beyond being called Christian?

- Then there is the most significant consideration to come from Paul's letters to the Corinthians, namely the focus he places on Jesus and Calvary. It seems Paul sees that proper attention given to Christ and his sacrifice and mission is a key factor to be used in correcting the errors and misdoings of believers. Can you describe what Jesus did for us at Calvary, followed by the Resurrection?

## Lesson 2 ~ The Message of the Cross

Read for This Week's Study: *1 Cor. 1:17-31, Col. 1:20, 1 Pet. 2:24, Acts 13:16-47, 1 Cor. 2:1-5.*

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**Memory Text:** "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (*1 Corinthians 1:18, NIV*).

**The Question:** What does a person do when what they imagined or hoped for ends up being quite different from the reality that they are experiencing?

The lesson this week asks us to look at the idea or concept that formed the main point of focus and emphasis the apostle Paul dwelt on as he set about his ministry to those in Corinth. That main point of focus was the cross of Christ. Paul's discussion about the cross is interesting in that he says it was a bunch of foolishness to the Greeks but also a stumbling block to the Jews while at the same time it was the power of God for our salvation. Several aspects of this invite our consideration.

First, we will consider the matter of the cross being foolishness to the Greeks. Why would this be so? The answer to this question comes from developing an understanding of the cross and what it was used for and what it meant in Roman society. History tells us that being crucified on the cross was one of the most terrible ways to die ever invented by humans. Dying by crucifixion meant a slow, agonizing death that came usually by way of exhaustion and asphyxiation resulting from the muscles in the body becoming too tired to breathe and so sustain life. We are given to understand that people who were crucified were hung so that in order to breathe, they had to stand themselves up as far as they could in order to relax the diaphragm, something necessary for breathing. Every time they stood themselves up, they generated a lot of pain in their feet and arms. Over a period of time - usually a day or two - they became exhausted and could no longer rise up to breathe so died from a lack of oxygen. This method of execution was thought to be so terrible that it was illegal to crucify a Roman citizen. Crucifixion was to be

used only for traitors, foreigners, and slaves. Dying by crucifixion placed a person at the very bottom of society, to be forever scorned and disdained. As the lesson noted, Cicero, a pagan Roman writer and orator, had told the Roman people to keep the idea of the cross, as a means of punishment, far from their minds. His statement illustrates the contempt with which the Romans had held the cross. It was so bad that they should not even think about it.

The official lesson had a paragraph that described this situation well. "Think about Paul's situation in this city. He comes to a place that prided itself on its own so-called knowledge and wisdom and cultural sophistication. And, in this context, he talks about a Galilean Jew, Jesus of Nazareth, who had been crucified by the Romans, and then raised from the dead—all in order to pay for not only their sins but for the sins of the world. *Can this guy be serious? Who was he kidding?* This wasn't some deep new philosophical concept, either, that could be parsed and analyzed by philosophical tools; it seemed to be lunacy, nonsense, nothing that any smart and educated Corinthian could take seriously." (p. 41, 42).

In light of this, for Christians to then laud a person who had been crucified and to say he was their Savior, put an enormous stain on credibility in the Roman mind. In the mind of the Romans, making this kind of claim was beyond ridiculous. And then to make the claim that the crucified person came back from the dead by way of a resurrection, put Christian claims into the category of the ludicrous as far as the Romans were concerned. At first glance, to them Christianity was worthy only of contempt or disdain. It was only after a more careful look, that the Christian faith became viable.

To the Jewish mind, disdain came from the idea that a peasant carpenter from a disreputable town, who gained a following, who said things to unsettle the *status quo*, who finally died at the hands of the Romans, also strained credibility. For some reason, the popular concept of a coming Messiah envisioned by the people back then, was for someone who would come in a much grander mode. The contrast between Jesus and the hoped-for Messiah was great enough that, at first glance, the Jewish community found Christianity unattractive, too. This humble man who lived outside of

respectable community simply could not be the Messiah. It was into this dynamic that Paul came intent on preaching the gospel of the cross.

There is room here for some thought and discussion about the way we react when there is a great distance between reality and what we imagine the situation to be. The distance between an expectation and the reality it corresponds to can be very difficult to manage. And the bigger the difference between the two, the more disillusionment and pain a person feels. This is a feature of many areas of human life!

Having noted that the gospel was foolishness to the Greeks, and a stumbling block to the Jews, Paul went on to say very forthrightly that the cross was the power of God for our salvation. The cross was where the love of God was displayed, where the humility of Christ was to be seen, where a basis for reconciliation between God and man was to be found, and where the debt caused by sin was paid. So, what looked like foolishness or a hindrance to belief was in fact the genius of God on display, the very means by way of which sin will be defeated.

- Here is cause to reflect on the fact that the ways of God are different from the ways of humans. What shall we make of this?
- Is what Paul says about foolishness vs. the cross of Christ reason enough for us to dismiss the whole idea of using philosophy when trying to convey the gospel?
- What about the cross makes it so attractive and powerful in the lives of those who believe?

## Lesson 3 – Unity in Christ

**Read for This Week's Study:** *1 Cor. 1:12–17, Rom. 1:29, 1 Cor. 1:10, 1 Cor. 3:1–4, Phil. 2:5–8, 2 Cor. 11:23–28, Col. 1:24.*

**Memory Text:** “I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment”  
(*1 Corinthians 1:10, ESV*).

**Opening Question:** What is the best way for people who often have varying beliefs to be able to maintain unity in the church?

One of the great appeals Paul makes to the Corinthian Christians is that they find a way to maintain unity in their midst, something that was quite lacking. It had been reported to Paul that there were factions in the church, factions driven by stated loyalties to various preachers and leaders who had come through the city at one point or another. Notice Paul's words – “One of you says, “I follow Paul”; another, “I follow Apollos”; another, “I follow Cephas<sup>[6]</sup>”; still another, “I follow Christ.” All-in-all, this was a recipe for division, one that, in Corinth actually led to members suing each other! (One has to wonder if these lawsuits had anything to do with theological differences or with other things).

Paul challenged the varying loyalties on display by countering that Christ is not divided, that primary loyalties should be linked to Christ not some human agent.

- What are we to do with situations where loyalties to various leaders become divisive, a feature of modern life for sure?
- How should we interpret Paul's advice against suing one another?
- There is space here to discuss the difference between unity and uniformity. What is it and how is one good, the other bad?
- What is the primary engine of unity in Christ?
- What role does human pride play in the enabling of conflict?
- How might humility help in situations where there is disagreement?

- Have you ever wondered why divisions in a church can be so strident and long-lasting?
- It has been said that theology divides, but mission unites. What do you think of this saying?
- Below is a wonderful quote to consider. Notice it applies when a church is being true to its ideals:
  - "The Christian Church, when it is true to its own ideal, claims to be a group of human beings once alienated but now related to one another because they have come into a relationship with God. It is a plain fact, open to verification, that within a Christian group people of very different ages, colors, races, status, income and intelligence are able to coexist in deep mutual understanding and harmony. Anyone who has been within a genuine Christian fellowship knows that this is true."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> T. M. Kitwood, *What Is Human?*, (Intervarsity Press, Downer's Grove, IL, 1970), p. 109, 110

## LESSON 4 ~ SIN IN THE CHURCH:

**Read for This Week's Study:** *1 Cor. 5:1-13, 2 Cor 2:5-10, 1 Cor. 6:1-13, 1 Thess. 4:1-8, 1 Cor. 6:19-7:9.*

**Memory Text:** "Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies" (*1 Corinthians 6:19, 20, NIV*).

**Opening Question:** What are we to do when we find blatant sin in the camp? How do we respond to situations where there is a difference between what is professed and what shows up as practice?

The official lesson this weeks is based mostly on 1 Corinthians 5-7

Even a cursory reading of Paul's letters to the Corinthians reveals that the church there had lots of troubles. One of them was a rather blatant case of sexual immorality, most probably a case of incest between a man and his step-mother. In ancient times, incest was prohibited as it is in current times. The problem there was not just the relationship but also the fact that what was going on was apparently accepted by the church and its members. When Paul heard of the situation, he did not spare his words telling the congregation not only to remove the man from fellowship, consign him to Satan, and then refuse even to eat with him!

This instance brings up a lot of things to talk about:

- Why is incest so frowned upon almost universally?
- What do we make of Paul's comment that our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit?
- Why do you think the church was at least tacitly accepting of the inappropriate relationship in their midst?
- The whole question of tolerance comes up rather readily here. What can be tolerated and what is not to be tolerated? What do we make of the old saying that "tolerance is something advocated by those who have no moral principles!"
- We could talk of church discipline here. The church disciplining a person is something not much done any more. Beyond that, it is often

frowned upon as being judgmental. What are some of the “rights-and-wrongs” of church discipline processes?

- How do we act redemptively when faced with sin in the camp?
- Think about the wreckage that has been brought about in human affairs by sexual issues that become unbounded.
- Why are sexual sins inveighed against so consistently in the Bible? And why are sexual sins worse than other sins? Or are they?
- One of the things Paul at least alludes to is protecting the reputation of the church community. Do you think that is necessary? If so, what is the best way to protect a church's reputation?
- One of the features of life is that we are all affected by our surroundings. Over time, this drift can affect what is acceptable in a religious community and what is not. How do we prevent this kind of negative drift?
- Paul does propose an antidote to immorality. It is to be filled with the Spirit. When a person is washed, sanctified and justified thereby entering into the family of God, the Spirit, if allowed to, drives out some of the old ways and ideas. The key is to continue to allow that process to be ever on-going.

# Lesson 5 - All to the Glory of God

Read for This Week's Study: *1 Corinthians 8; Acts 15:20; 1 Cor. 9:1-6; 1 Cor. 10:5-22; Deut. 6:4, 5; Mark 12:28-31.*

Memory Text: "Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God"  
(*1 Corinthians 10:31, NKJV*).

**The Initial Question:** What are Christians supposed to do when a particular issue does not offend one person's conscience while at the same time it offends others in the same congregation?

In these chapters of his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul takes up a matter that seems to be quite remote from us but one that can be used to learn some significant lessons. The issue had to do with eating food that had been offered to idols. Offering food to idols was a practice that was very common in Paul's day and for several reasons. The most significant and immediate reason was that people believed there were many demons and devils all around, entities that were looking for ways to gain entrance into people's lives. And eating was on such way. The thought was that, if food had been offered to a good god, the prospect of being overtaken by demons was erased. Because of that, there was almost no meat that could be bought that had not been through some kind of ritual like that. This meant that if a Christian did not eat meat, and if he or she did not eat meat with other citizens unless it was free of a ceremony, that person would be cut of from almost all social interactions that involved eating.

A second problem had to do with the fact that, when people became Christians, some of them came to the point where they understood that demons and idols are immaterial, that they have no reality that can impact life while others continued to think such things existed. Those who came to the point of negating demons, etc. would eat the meat offered to idols without any qualms for they saw that as mere superstition. On the other hand, those who had not yet progressed to the point of discounting idols and demons, would become quite unsettled when they saw a brother or sister sitting and eating meat blessed by idols. What was a person to do?

Paul then goes on in Chapter 9 to talk about Christian freedom, a freedom that comes because a person has been freed from superstitions by accepting Christ. The first category of people would eat without damaging conscience while the second would be troubled a great deal. What is a person to do? In this section, Paul juxtaposes knowledge over against acting out of love.

Several things have been suggested as responses to what Paul says in this section:

- Christians need to recognize that what is safe in terms of conscience for one person, may be highly detrimental to another person. The context in which a person grew up, and the degree to which another person has matured in their Christian understanding, both play a role in helping direct actions. Paul's counsel was that we must always think not only of how some action will affect us, but how it will affect others as well. And if our actions are going to be detrimental to others, we should willingly curb them.
- The criteria for making judgments about various practices or actions should never be based only by what a person knows but should also be guided by love. And love may well dictate that a person should refrain from an action they deem permissible in order to show love to others who do not agree.
- When it comes to exercising Christian freedom, no person has the right to indulge in some activity or pleasure that would end up being the ruination of a fellow believer. Christian freedom is not unbounded. It should be corralled by love. This might well mean a person curbs their freedom willingly in order to retain faith in another person.
- The question of individual rights can easily come to the fore here. What is a person to do when they insist on a right that does damage to others? Often, the Christian thing to do is not to claim the privilege or insist on having the right.

Paul resorts to using a sports analogy here. This analogy is useful and helpful for it allows consideration of several more truths:

- Those who desire to achieve athletic success, discipline themselves, And though they all participate and hope to win, everyone knows only one will do so. The rest will have to be gracious losers.
- Anything worth achieving is likely to require discipline and effort.
- The prize humans strive so diligently for is a transitory one. At the same time, Christians struggle to win an eternal prize.
- Humility is to be much more highly prized and sought after than arrogance or over-confidence.

# Lesson 6 – Spiritual Gifts

**Read for This Week's Study:** *1 Corinthians 12, Eph. 4:11–13, 1 Corinthians 13, 1 Pet. 4:8–11, 1 Cor. 14:27, Amos 3:7.*

**Memory Text:** “Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy”  
(*1 Corinthians 14:1, ESV*).

## **The Opening Question: What do you know about Spiritual gifts**

The lesson this week invites a careful consideration of 1 Corinthians 12 and 13, with a little foray into chapter 14, too. There is a lot of material in these chapters that can be talked about.

We might first talk of the matter of unity. There are repeated calls and intimations in these chapters that indicate there needs to be unity in the believing community. Unity is not the same thing as uniformity and it is important not to get the two things confused. Uniformity occurs when everyone thinks and does the same things. Uniformity does not allow for any difference for it sees differences as bad, indications that not everyone is on-board with the plan, whatever it might be. Uniformity almost always requires some entity to use coercion to make sure everyone is in compliance. Unity, on the other hand, is very different. It involves the willing compliance of those who are associating together. It springs from willing involvement in some common mission. It is an internal compulsion that allows people to overlook their differences that they might work together on their chosen mission. Here investment in mission causes them to minimize or even ignore differences.

At the same time, we need to talk about diversity. Diversity is a much-used word these days and it seems to be used mostly in connection with cultural and racial differences. But diversity is much broader than just those two categories. In particular in these chapters, diversity is focused on the various abilities the Holy Spirit gives to people in order to facilitate the mission of the church. The list given in 1 Cor. 12 is not thought to be exhaustive and it varies a little from the other New Testament lists in Ephesians and Romans. But the

point is that, in order to facilitate the mission of the church, believers are given different "gifts" or abilities that enable them to participate in the proclamation of the gospel. One of the points made by Paul is that, while some gifts are more prominent than others, none should be despised or looked down upon. The analogy drawn between the human body and the church is well-known.

Paul points to one gift that should preside over all the others and that is love. The love he speaks about, particularly in 1 Corinthians 13, is also well-known. The love Paul has in mind is a robust, action-oriented love. It does not just feel things, but does, or does not do, certain things. This love is supposed to moderate or govern the use of the gifts thereby maintaining unity in the church.

Reading this section in 1 Corinthians makes it plain that there was one gift that was of particular concern to Paul. That was the gift of tongues. For some reason, the use of that gift was causing problems in the church in Corinth. Interestingly, this gift is still a matter of contention in the Christian church today. The basic issue has to do with whether the word "tongues" refers to actual known languages foreign to the speaker, or to some form of ecstatic utterances of some kind. There are some people who insist it has to mean foreign languages while others claim it has to do with ecstatic utterance. Unfortunately, the text is not clear enough to make a clear decision on this. But, the fact that Paul sets some boundaries to the use of this gift of tongues tends to favor the idea of actual languages though it is hard to know of what use the gift would be, why it would be used if there had to be someone to interpret what was said. Would not the person who had facility with that language just to the speaking? At the same time, it is hard to see the value of some ecstatic utterance if people could not understand it. Whatever the case, this issue remains difficult. What is not difficult is that however the gift is perceived, it should not be the cause of disruption or contention.

A final note to make here is that Paul makes the point very clearly that everyone is given some gift by the Spirit. Have you identified yours? And have you put it to good use?

# Lesson 7 – A Portrait of Love

**Read for This Week's Study:** *1 Corinthians 13; Matt. 24:12; Gal. 5:22, 23; 1 Tim. 1:14; 1 John 4:8.*

**Memory Text:** "And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love" (*1 Corinthians 13:13, NIV*).

**The Opening Question:** "Is love something you feel, or is it something that you do?"

The lesson this week invites us to focus on the famous love chapter of the Bible, 1 Corinthians 13. This chapter comes as part of a larger discussion by the apostle Paul focused on the problems of the church in Corinth. He makes the case that their whole situation could be largely remedied if there was love present in their midst. To Paul, love is the greatest of gifts.

In light of that, we should ask ourselves to explain just what love is. For many today it is mostly a certain type of emotion that makes a person feel happy. This kind of love is fleeting to say the least. The love Paul has in mind is much more robust. The official lesson describes it as an "attitude that must be expressed in life, in deeds and in words." In other words, the love spoken of in Corinthians is something a person does. It has qualities that have to be expressed in ways that affect a person's life as well as the lives of those around them. This love is Holy Spirit driven. It is not something that comes naturally or easily to humans.

The various elements of this kind of love shows up in 1 Corinthians 13 as qualities or behaviors, even:

- Love shows patience, that rare quality to remain in control even in the midst of trying circumstances. It causes a person to be forbearing even with aggravating people! In light of this, some thought must be given to the consequences of praying for patience!
- Love shows kindness. This concept has overtones of mercy. A kind person acts in ways that diminish another person's suffering. A kind

person tries to act redemptively, minimizing an issue so that life can once again operate normally.

- Love bears all things. In other words, it manifests resilience. It does not give up easily.
- Love believes all things. This cannot be taken in its fullest sense for it would create a situation where gullibility would prevail. Rather, it should be taken to mean that a loving person gives another person the benefit of the doubt. But the old saying should still prevail, "Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me."
- True love hopes. This is the expectation that something good is in the offing and that we should continue to wait for it. Hope is a very helpful quality in life. It enables people to endure and to persist even in the face of great difficulty.
- Love endures all things. The meaning here is to manifest endurance even in the midst of hard things.

Another feature of the love described in 1 Corinthians 13 is that there is a list of things love is not or does not do:

- It does not envy -
- Love does not boast, a quality that is often indicative of arrogance or pride. It is focused on promoting self, something love does not do.
- Love does not puff up - this speaks of self-importance, again something that is not found where love abounds.
- Love does not behave rudely - this means to act in ways that are contrary to social and moral standards.
- Love does not push for its own rights - Love is self-sacrificial rather than pushing for whatever it thinks a person is due.
- Love is not easily irritated - here is a tough one for aggravation comes very easily to most people.
- Does not keep records of wrongs - this probably has in mind the ability not to hold a person's past misdeeds against them, to keep no record of wrongs but to allow a contrite person to begin again.

- Does not delight in wrong-doing - probably the focus here is on the wrong-doings of others, that a loving person would not be inclined to delight in the wrongs others do and the ill effects that would follow those misdeeds.

These two lists are challenging to read and think about for both the positive elements of love here and the negative ones are not normal products of the human mind. The qualities mentioned seem only to grow where a human heart has been tamed by the Holy Spirit who enables love to grow from day to day.

A last point to be made - and it is a major one - is that love is seen in the actions and teachings of Jesus more than in any other place. Jesus, of all humans, exhibited love more than any other person ever has, even to the point of giving up his life to save sinners. Think of the many times Jesus exhibited the various good qualities of love and how he never showed the bad ones. Here is a person and life worthy of emulation.

## Lesson 8 – The Power of Christ's Resurrection

**Read for This Week's Study:** *1 Corinthians 15; Luke 24:44–47; Rev. 20:5, 6; Col. 2:12; 2 Tim. 1:12; 1 Thess. 4:13–17.*

**Memory Text:** "And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty. . . And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins!" (*1 Corinthians 15:14–17, NKJV*).

**The Opening Question:** What is it about the resurrection that makes it so pivotal in the Christian plan of salvation?

This week we are invited to consider the subject of the resurrection, the fact that, three days after Jesus was crucified, he rose up back to life. From a human perspective, this is not possible. We have seen many people die, but we have never seen anyone come back to life again. Yet that is precisely what is claimed about Jesus.

There are a lot of things to consider on this matter. The first is that the Bible is very clear that Jesus died. Some people deny the fact of the resurrection by claiming that, well, Jesus did not actually die but went into some kind of coma or swoon from which he awakened. Truth is, one only has to read the story of the crucifixion but once to see that Jesus had died for when the soldiers came to break the legs to those who had been crucified, they did not bother to break the legs of Jesus for he was already and obviously dead. There was even some surprise that he had died so quickly for it was common for crucified persons to linger on the cross for a day or two.

It is also very clear from the New Testament records that Jesus rose again. It is almost amusing to notice that every step taken to make sure Jesus stayed in the grave, ended up adding to the proof of his being alive again. Think first of the Roman soldiers who were posted there to make sure nobody tampered with the seal that had been placed on the stone in front of the tomb. They were powerless to stop the angles who came and, in amazement and fear, they rushed off into the city to tell what had happened knowing that in the Roman system, there was a well-known rule that if a soldier somehow lost the

prisoner he was guarding, his life would substituted for that of the prisoner. So, in effect, this group were running into town to announce their own demise.

Then we have the fact of an empty tomb, something witnessed by several people, at least one of whom met Jesus in the garden before he ascended to heaven.

There are also the post-resurrection appearances of which there were many, spread out over a 40-day period. The Apostle Paul speaks of this to the Corinthians and reminds them that at one point, there were about 500 believers gathered together in one place to whom Jesus appeared. Paul even makes a little challenge telling the Corinthians that many of those witnesses were still alive at that time should they care to check the story with them.

Just as important as the fact of the resurrection are the implications or consequences of it. The implications or effects of the resurrection are enormous to the point that if it did not actually occur, we would be of all person's most miserable. Notice at least the following:

- If Jesus was not risen, he would not be whom he claimed to be. Rather, he would be a charlatan, a hoax, a liar.
- The promise of salvation would be voided as not only would there have been no effective sacrifice for the sins of the world, there would also not be anyone to apply those provisions to human lives.
- There would be no forgiveness of sins possible.
- The promise of a second coming would become nonsense for there would be no Jesus to return again.
- The hope of being reunited with those who have died in hope of a resurrection of the dead, would be void. The death of a loved one is bad enough when there is the hope of a resurrection, but to have that hope as a comfort only to find out it is a lie, would be the more terrible!
- The promise of heaven, a final resting place, would be voided.

- The whole system of Messianic prophecies and the whole sacrificial system of the Old Testament would have no value, effectively pointing to nothing at all.
- The whole of the Christian preaching of the gospel would be null and void, a waste of time. Those who preach the gospel would be found to be false witnesses.
- The symbolism and purpose of baptism would be voided for there would be no forgiveness for sin, nor would there be any Christ to unite with.

Given all these particulars, it is not hard to see why Paul stated that if the resurrection is not a fact of history, we would of all people be most miserable for we would have had a great hope - an almost unbelievably great hope - only to find out that it was false. That would be a worse situation than if we never had a hope in the first place.

Another interesting point to be made here is the, after his resurrection, Jesus had a body. It was a more glorious body than what he had on earth in that it is not subject to the frailties of human bodies here, but he did end up being an embodied person rather than some ethereal spirit. Believers who are saved in the end can expect also end up as embodied beings. It seems from this that heaven will be a real place rather than just some non-physical place. Those who might want to argue against this might remind themselves that when God created life, it was on this earth, a physical place. And the beings he placed here were embodied beings. Perhaps the spiritual realm, the non-earthly realm, has more physicality than we sometimes imagine.

Perhaps, from a human perspective, the greatest truth to contemplate when thinking about the resurrection, is that it provides certainty that death, the worst and most final enemy of humans, can be defeated. Because Jesus rose again, and because he raised others to life again, we know death is not final. It was not for Jesus, and it will not be for those who believe and trust in him! In this we find the greatest and most hope-inducing idea humans can entertain.

# Lesson 9 – Love-driven Ministry

**Read for This Week's Study:** 2 Cor. 1:3–14, 2 Cor. 2:17, 2 Cor. 4:2, 1 Cor. 16:5–7, 2 Cor. 7:5–13, 2 Cor. 2:5–17.

**Memory Text:** “For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you, with many tears, not that you should be grieved, but that you might know the love which I have so abundantly for you” (2 Corinthians 2:4, NKJV).

**Opening Question:** How much suffering would you be willing to endure in the pursuit of some chosen mission?

This week, we are going to encounter some very interesting passages from Paul's letters to the Corinthians that have to do with recording many of the difficulties he experienced as he traveled around preaching the gospel, at one point noting that they had been troubled beyond measure to the point they thought death would be their lot. But God delivered them and sent them again on their way.

One of the most remarkable sets of verses on this matter of Paul's sufferings is found in 2 Corinthians 11:24–28. **READ this passage.**

- It is hard to realize that one person endured all of these hardships.
- Which one strikes you as the most difficult to endure?
- An interesting one is that he experienced shipwreck three times, a testimony to the dangerous nature of travel by sea in antiquity. Part of those experiences involved him being “in the deep for a night and a day,” which must mean he was floating in the ocean for that long!
- Probably the most painful were the beatings!

One has to wonder what motivated the man to continue onward given these adversities with the sure knowledge that there would be more to come!

The answer comes in v. 28 – “my deep concern for all the churches.” This kind of concern could only be motivated by love. Once a church was established, Paul did not wash his hands of it but retained his concern for their well-

being. He maintained contact with them by visiting them again, by writing letters back and forth, or by having an associate visit them to observe what was happening then to bring back a report.

It is very interesting to see how Paul talks about finding comfort in the midst of his sufferings. We do not usually link those two things together, suffering and comfort. But Paul is able to talk of comfort because he had been comforted by God so that in turn, he was enabled to comfort others. This point is made in 2 Cor. 1:2-3 where Paul points out that God comforts him and his fellow workers so that they can comfort those in the churches. One of the outcomes of this whole process is that affliction refines character. Few people desire affliction, but many testify after having endured affliction, that they would not trade it away because of what they learned about God and themselves. In so many cases, suffering made them more focused and more efficient in carrying out their tasks.

Another feature of Paul's letters is that he talks of his work as being characterized by simplicity and sincerity. He was not among those who preach in hopes of making money. He worked with his hands to support himself then used his "spare" time to preach. These facts added significantly to the genuineness of the message he proclaimed. It made it difficult for those who heard him to question his motivations, to call his integrity into question. It seems the same holds true for this day.

Another interesting aspect of this second letter to the Corinthians is that it indicates Paul changed his plans along the way. It is clear that Paul had four significant interchanges with the Corinthians, some in person the rest by letter. And we learn that at one point, he decided not to visit in person because of the fear a personal visit would be too much for those he was writing to, to endure. He wanted them to correct some ideas and behaviors but used a letter to produce the change rather than coming in person. That is quite interesting and is something to note, that the path of prudence is often a very good course follow. Let the people hear the bad news about themselves, but without the actual presence of the one rebuking them which would then let them have time to mend their ways. And this is precisely what happened in

this case. Paul found out later from Titus that his strategy had produced a good effect. We might say Paul changed his plans because of love!

One other interesting thing in this section (2 Corinthians 2:5-11) has to do with the instructions Paul gave the Corinthians about dealing with someone who had done wrong. It is not know whether this is a reference to the person mentioned earlier in his letters, or if it is another person, but the lesson to be learned from what Paul had to say is that sometimes church discipline is necessary. It may well be difficult, but when it has to be done it should always be as redemptive as possible. This is often a very challenging thing to pull off. The difficult part is letting the offending person know that what they have done cannot be approved, but yet that person is loved. Any hint of self-righteousness on the part of those administering discipline will cause havoc. If the person can be brought to the point where they acknowledge their wrong, then there is hope of reconciliation. It has to be kept always in mind that we are called to love wrongdoers, and we can love wrong-doers because we ourselves are the recipients of love.

## Lesson 10 - Authentic Christian Ministry

**Read for This Week's Study:** 2 Cor. 3:1-9, 2 Cor. 4:7-18, 2 Cor. 5:11-15, Col. 1:19-23, Eph. 2:13-16, 2 Cor. 6:11-7:1, 2 Corinthians 7.

**Memory Text:** "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies" (2 Corinthians 4:8-10, ESV).

**Opening Question:** How would you describe an authentic Christian ministry?

The lesson this week invites us to consider the various items that appear in 2 Corinthians chapter 3-7. There are several noteworthy items.

This section begins with the Apostle's comments about the church members in Corinth being letters of recommendation for Christ. He is here using a common practice of those times to illustrate a Christian truth or make a point to the believers. In Roman times, people often carried with them letters of recommendation, hopefully from significant, respected persons in order to establish themselves in a new location. Sometimes those letters were good and useful while at other times they were mere ruses. Paul says he does not need any letters of recommendation for it is the church people in Corinth who serve to legitimize him, and not just him but also Christ who commissioned him to be a proclaimer of the gospel. Some have noted that there is both an inspirational message here and a warning for, whether we like it or not, very Christian is an open letter for Jesus and for Christianity. This fact can call us to a high standard of living while, conversely, if we do not live righteously, we provide a very sad and detrimental commentary for our Savior and church. It is claimed by many outside of the church that a major reason they cannot see themselves joining is that the testimony of the faithful is quite weak.

In 1 Cor. 3, Paul goes on to note that all adequacy in ministry comes from God, not from human abilities. He makes a very interesting and important comment when he talks about a ministry or relationship that depends on a written document that is deadly in that it cannot produce life for life,

authentic ministry occurs due to the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit. The point is that no real change takes place until the Spirit works a change in a person's heart. We may talk about God and the things of God, and we can preach, and teach, and do all manner of things but those things will not be permanent unless and until the Spirit makes an internal change in a person. IN fact, this is the whole point and hope of ministry, that what we do gives occasion for people who do not believe to come under the influence of the Spirit to be changed into sons and daughters of God.

# Lesson 11 – Stewardship and Mission

**Read for This Week's Study:** *2 Corinthians 8–9; John 3:16; John 17:5; Luke 9:58; Rev. 13:8; Rom. 12:8; Rom. 15:26, 27.*

**Memory Text:** "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich" (*2 Corinthians 8:9, NKJV*).

**The Opening Question:** How do you respond to the verse in the Bible that says God loves a cheerful giver?

The lesson this week is based on 2 Corinthians chapters 8 and 9, two chapters in which Paul talks to the Corinthians about a gift they had promised to raise. As best we can tell, there the church in Jerusalem was in trouble because of a lack of money, perhaps brought on by something that caused the crops there to fail, a real problem in an agrarian economy. At the same time, in Macedonia and in Corinth, things were better though the Macedonians were by now means flush with money. As these chapter progress, we learn several things about giving, and not just about giving money.

The first thing to learn is that any ability to give, and any willingness to give, is predicated on the fact that we have already been recipients of the grace of God, first of all for salvation, but then also by virtue of the fact that the ability to earn money and to use it well, comes from a knowledge of God. Belief in God produces a sense of personal responsibility and also a desire to use whatever resources we have in hand well.

A second thing to be learned here is that a spirit or willingness to be generous, is a characteristic of God that will show up in the lives of those who follow him. People who have been the recipients of the good news, rather quickly develop a desire to do whatever they can to make sure those who have not heard will have a chance to hear. They give time, influence as well as money in hopes of achieving the desired goal.

A third thing we learn is that giving of whatever resources we have should be done willingly. There is no place here for coercion nor for giving motivated by

guilt. If we realize that God was generous with us in giving his son to come as a sacrifice to save us, that same giving spirit ought to infect our lives. Paul notes that God loves a cheerful giver! When giving is motivated by the right spirit, gifts of time and influence and even money are given cheerfully, bringing joy to the giver and benefit to the receiver.

Another thing to be learned is that giving is best facilitated when there is a plan. In these chapters, on more than one occasion Paul talks about the plan made by the Macedonians, and the plan made by the Corinthians, and the plan of having his helpers gather and transport whatever monies were raised. This is not to deny the value of spontaneous giving, but it is to say that planned giving enables a sense of unity to grow as it also helps people be more strategic in their giving. It is quite amazing how effective collective giving can be, how focused it can be on fulfilling specific needs.

It is noteworthy that Paul writes about how the gift will be carefully and responsibly administered and distributed. He makes the point that he wants the whole matter of the collection and distribution to be beyond criticism. He wrote of taking pains to do what is right in the eyes of God and man. Here is an important point. The work of God involves both a divine and a human dimension. And, on the human side, it calls for work to be done in a responsible and business-like manner. In modern times, that would suggest there be policies and protocols to protect the process, that there be auditors, perhaps, to testify to the rectitude of the activities, and there should be a willingness to tell the givers just how the money was used.

It is also interesting to read the effects that Paul expected to accrue at the end of the process. Not only would the fellow Christians be lifted up from their destitution, but God would be glorified. Other people would see what had happened and be impressed by the good works of the believers to the point of at least becoming curious about what it was that produced such action.

Another thing worthy of noting is the instruction that giving should be done proportionately, meaning that those with much would give much and those with little would give little, everyone giving as they chose and were able. The idea was for people to give according to what they had, not according to what

they do not have. This would mean that the burden of giving would be born equally among the believers.

## Lesson 12 – Dealing with False Teachers

**Read for This Week's Study:** *2 Cor. 10:1–17; Jer. 9:24; 2 Cor. 11:1–15, 22–28; 2 Cor. 12:20, 21; 2 Cor. 13:5.*

**Memory Text:** “For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds” (*2 Corinthians 10:4, ESV*).

**The Opening Question:** How would you respond to the discovery of a person who is teaching falsehood?

This week we come to some sections of 2 Corinthians that many think are the most difficult to understand. Why? Because we only get to hear Paul's side of the discussion so are kept in the dark, forced to try to figure out what kind of accusations Paul was responding to.

There is an interesting side note here. We know that Paul wrote at least 3 letters to the Corinthians of which we presume to have only two. We are left to wonder about the third. And because of the different tone in chapters 10-12, and because they seem to intrude on what Paul was saying earlier, there are those who think these chapters may well be the third letter, somehow misplaced. Earlier when Paul was writing about the collections, it seemed he was wrapping things up. Then comes this section with harsh words.

One way to make sense of these chapters is to try to figure out the charges the Corinthians laid at Paul's feet. Some of them seem easy to discern:

- It seems they charged Paul with being quite bold when he was away and writing letters compared to his gentleness when he was with them in person. They seem to have accused him of writing things in his letters that he did not have the courage to say when he was with them in person. His response was that he was quite capable of laying them out in lavender, so to speak, but chose not to do that when he was with them in person because of the powerful effect of personal presence that might have actually caused harm that would have been hard to mend.

- It seems they also charged him with acting purely on human and personal motives. Perhaps they were even thinking he was trying to act in ways that gave him status and power. His response essentially was to say that he was a human in a human body like everyone else but that he did not allow himself to be motivated or dominated by purely human and selfish motives. He spoke of guided by the Spirit, of bringing all of his intentions into captivity to Christ.
- A good case can be made that the Corinthians had gone further, to the point of making fun of Paul's appearance. They said he was weak and was not a trained speaker, therefore not very good. It is a pretty sad day when protagonists resort to that kind of thing for our bodies and our appearances are pretty well fixed. Further, we did not have anything to do with our physical make-up. It is fair to say that there are many examples in history of people who did not strike a very good pose who were, in fact, history-changers because of their ideas and their tenacity toward achieving a particular end.
- There is some indication that the Corinthians also accused Paul of making boastful claims about authority. Interestingly, he pointed out to them that he had every right to assert some authority over them because he was the one who first brought them the gospel! Paul disavowed any boastfulness saying that, if he were to boast, it would only be in what Christ had done and in what Christ had enabled him to do.

In these chapters, Paul also has a few things to say about those who claim to be superior teachers, who argue they have superior truth. Paul will have none of that warning the church to take decided but not unkind action against them. We can make a connection between what Paul said here and what he had to say to the Galatians, warning them against any who might come along preaching a different gospel.

One of the more moving and amazing section are the verses in Chapter 11 where Paul details the sufferings he has endured because of the gospel.

## Lesson 13 – Grace, Love and Fellowship

Read for This Week's Study: 2 Cor. 8:9; Rom. 16:20;

1 John 4:8-11; 2 Cor. 13:11; Phil. 2:1, 2; Gal. 4:4-6.

Memory Text: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (2 Corinthians 13:14, *ESV*).

### The Opening Question:

We have before us the final lesson in this collection that has focused on Paul's letters to the Corinthian Christians. Interestingly, Paul ends his letter by reemphasizing several of the important elements that he has laid before them. He does this by using five imperatives, requests he wanted them to work on:

The first imperative, "Rejoice" (*ESV*), recalls earlier texts in the letters. There are a lot of reasons for Christians to rejoice not the least of which is the grace of Christ. WE can speak first of grace as something offered to humans that results in the forgiveness of sins and for being adopted into the family of God. Do not forget that grace was extended while we were yet sinners! But grace could also be spoken of as the thing that caused Jesus to leave heaven and come to earth in order to satisfy the demands of the law. And grace can also be talked of as the thing that enables humans to grow in their experiences to be more and more like Jesus himself. And it can be said that grace received results in grace being extended to others by those who have been forgiven and adopted. There is lots here to be thankful for.

The second imperative is a request for them to strive for full restoration. This is not just restoration of a deferential relationship with God, but also one that involves fellow humans. Christianity calls for union with God but also for unity among believers. There is lots to do in this second area that requires on-going effort.

The third imperative is for believers to encourage one another." This hardly bears much discussion, its need being so obvious. We might observe that encouraging others is usually not very difficult. Often, just showing concern or making a visit will be sufficient to lift spirits. In 2 Corinthians 1:3-7. Paul

begins and closes his second letter with encouragement. We receive God's encouragement in order to encourage others (2 Cor. 1:4, 6).

The fourth imperative is a call to unity, for believers to live in unity. Here we draw a distinction between unity and uniformity. These two are not the same, unity being the more important of the two.

And the last imperative is to live in peace. (2 Cor. 13:11, NKJV). This calls for atmosphere of joy, restoration, encouragement, unity, and peace to be developed and encouraged and is the condition for the presence of God, "the God of love and peace" (2 Cor. 13:11, ESV). It results from our triune God's work in the human heart (2 Cor. 13:14). The presence of humility and selflessness are characteristics that go a long way to enabling this kind of atmosphere to grow and remain.

Grace, love, and fellowship result from the work of the triune God for us. These three Christian features promote an atmosphere characterized by God's presence. They are ministered to humans and developed in human lives by the working of the Holy Spirit.