

LESSON SIX

PAUL'S FIRST CORINTHIAN LETTER

A. AUTHORSHIP:

The Apostle Paul wrote this letter. *"Paul, called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God" (I Corinthians 1:1). "The salutation of me Paul with mine own hand" (I Corinthians 16:21).*

Paul wrote this epistle possibly in the spring of the year AD 57 from Ephesus. We know that Paul was at Ephesus when he wrote this epistle from the following reference: *"But I will tarry at Ephesus until Pentecost" (I Corinthians 16:8).*

B. CORINTH:

The city of Corinth was a Roman colony, located on the Isthmus of Corinth. This was on the principle trade route of the Roman Empire, from east to west. Through the nature harbors of Corinth flowed the commerce of the world.

The Romans had destroyed the city of Corinth in the year 146 BC but had been rebuilt of pure white marble by Julius Caesar 100 years later.

When Paul reached Corinth for the first time in the year AD 51 he found a thriving commercial city. It was the metropolis of Greece and the fourth in size in the Roman Empire, being surpassed only by Rome, Alexandria and Antioch. The population was largely Greek, with mixed minorities of Romans, Jews and other nationalities. Besides being known for its trade and commerce, Corinth was known for the fact that the people of Corinth gave themselves over to pleasure, entertainment and vices of many sorts. Corinth was called the "vanity fair" of the Roman Empire.

High above the city was the magnificent temple of white marble, dedicated to the goddess of the city, Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty, identified by the Romans with Venus. This fact that they worshipped the goddess of love encouraged all kinds of immortality to be practiced at Corinth.

C. THE CORINTHIAN CHURCH:

The historical account of the origin of the Corinthian Church is given in the first 18 verses of the 18th chapter of Acts. Paul was the founder of the church during his second missionary journey. Paul and his companions had gone into Macedonia and Greece and had founded churches at Philippi, Thessalonica and at Corinth. Paul had labored for 18 months at Corinth and one of his greatest churches was founded here.

Some Jews had been converted but the majority of the church was Gentiles. In the Corinthian church were found rich, poor, educated and ignorant. This church was troubled with cliques and there was an element of emotional people whose extremes degenerated into immorality. The loose habits of heathenism clung to many. Yet, Paul addressed the church as the church of God, called to be saints, sanctified in Christ Jesus (I Corinthians 1:2).

The membership of the church included slaves as well as free men. A few members were wealthy but the majority was poor.

D. THE PURPOSE OF THE CORINTHIAN LETTER:

The epistle that is known as I Corinthians was not the first letter, which Paul had written to the saints at Corinth. We know this from his statement in I Corinthians 5:9, "*I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators.*"

In the year AD 54, Paul left Antioch on his third journey, visiting again the churches of Galatia and finally reaching the city of Ephesus in Asia Minor. Here he stayed for the next three years. From Ephesus, Corinth was only some 200 miles west, across the Aegean Sea over which communication was easy and frequent.

While he was at Ephesus, persons of the household of Chloe (I Corinthians 1:11) came from Corinth to report the disorders in the church there. Apparently Paul wrote a letter which is now lost and in which he scolded the Corinthians for their misconduct and sent it to Corinth by the hand of Chloe's people.

Paul had sent Timothy to Corinth by way of Macedonia but had not heard from him when a delegation came from Corinth led by Stephanas. It would seem that a letter came at the same time from Corinth asking certain questions (I Corinthians 7:1).

From this we discover that carnal people can cover up their carnality by asking theological questions. Paul did not hurry to answer their questions. Not until chapter 7 did he say: "*Now concerning the things whereof ye wrote unto me.*" In the first 6 chapters he dealt with a situation that existed in the church at Corinth. He goes right to the root of the trouble first, and then he answers their questions.

The first 11 chapters of this epistle deal with carnality. Paul exposes the tragedy of their living in sin and worldliness and applies the positive remedy of the cross of Jesus Christ. In the 12th chapter, we read where Paul began to teach of spiritual things (I Corinthians 12:1). "*Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I would not have you ignorant.*" The last five chapters deal with spirituality and expound the gospel of resurrection and life.

E. DIVISIONS CORRECTED BY THE CROSS: (I Corinthians 1).

1. KEY VERSE:

"That no flesh should glory in his presence" (I Corinthians 1:29). "He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord" (I Corinthians 1:31). In these two verses, we have the key thought for the epistle expressed. It is a message condemning the exaltation of the flesh and pointing the Corinthian church to the Lord that they may glory in Jesus and in Jesus alone.

2. SALUTATION:

In the salutation Paul vindicated his apostleship: called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ, through the will of God. Paul was not boasting or glorying in the fact that he was an apostle but it was necessary for him to state his authority. If they were going to accept what he was going to write in this letter it would be necessary for the Corinthian saints to recognize the authority by which Paul wrote.

In addressing the Corinthians he called them the church of God, sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints. Although his church was torn by divisions and man-worship, and in the church there was to be sin found, yet, at the very beginning, the Apostle Paul drew their attention to the fact that they were to be sanctified, set apart, unto God and that their calling, above everything else was to be saints.

We should note that he mentions grace and peace. Grace is mentioned first for one cannot receive peace from God unless he has first received the grace of God. Not only were they to receive grace and peace from God but their lives were to be enriched with a spiritual wealth in utterance and in all knowledge. They had a message to proclaim a gospel to preach and they had received the Holy Spirit by whom they would have the wisdom and strength to understand fully, that which they were to proclaim.

3. THE FAITHFULNESS OF GOD:

In verse 9 Paul mentioned the faithfulness of God. This seemed to be a theme which he carried throughout the epistle, for he comes back to it again in I Corinthians 15:58. Because of God's faithfulness, then the exhortation is for the saints to be steadfast, unmovable, abounding in the work of the Lord. Because of the faithfulness of God, then they would be presented when the Lord returns, blameless. Note that there is a difference between being blameless and faultless. Perfection means that we are to be blameless. This, each child of God has the power and the privilege to achieve.

4. DIVISION CAUSED BY EXALTING LEADERS:

In the Corinthian church there were many party divisions and man-worship. Largely the Christians getting their eyes upon the preacher and exalting the preacher under whose ministry they had been converted caused the divisions in the church. Paul cut through all these divisions by reminding them that it was Christ that was crucified and it was in His name that they all were baptized. We should note that Paul's method of curing division was by directing everyone to Jesus. Christ cannot be divided and He is the one center and source of all spiritual unity.

5. DIVISION CAUSED BY EXALTING HUMAN WISDOM:

Paul dealt with this with the preaching of the cross. To the worldly wise, the preaching of Christ crucified, and salvation through His sacrifice, was foolishness, but to the believer it was the highest wisdom that one may receive.

To the born again child of God, the preaching of the cross becomes the power of God. When ego with all its pride, its self-righteousness, and self-importance, is crucified, then that person is brought into contact with his throne and begins to touch omnipotence and receive power.

6. PAUL'S STATEMENT ON BAPTISM:

Paul had baptized only a few at Corinth. This was not because he didn't place importance on baptism, but he took a humble position not taking pride in being able to name large numbers that he had personally baptized. He was willing to preach and let others do the baptizing.

7. THOSE WHOM GOD USES:

The Apostle Paul gives a list of those whom God uses: foolish things, weak things, base things, things which are despised and things which are not. God uses the most humble and insignificant so that no flesh may glory in his presence and God is become our wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption so that all glory may be in Him alone.

F. TRUE WISDOM IMPARTED BY THE SPIRIT: (I Corinthians 2).

Paul went to Corinth in weakness, in fear and in much trembling. His reception on the European continent had not been very pleasant. He had been imprisoned at Philippi; smuggled out of Thessalonica, driven out of Berea and when he reached Athens he accomplished very little by arguing with them. He had been pressed in spirit as he came to Corinth and God Himself had encouraged him.

Knowing the strength of Corinthian wisdom and the character of the city, the depths of its sin and the boast of its intellect, he determined that he would not argue or debate with anybody but present the crucified, risen Lord in the conviction that if he lifted Jesus up, Jesus would draw all men unto him. The Apostle Paul had to get out of the picture so that people would forget the personality of the preacher and get their eyes upon Jesus. The Lord gets the glory and the result would be absolutely convincing.

The principle then is as true today as it was. There must be a life willing to be crucified, to retreat from its won cleverness and wisdom from its own efforts, and rest entirely upon the anointing of the Holy Spirit. Faith shall stand, not in the wisdom of man, but in the power of God. The preacher must preach not what the people want, but what they need. No man has any business to be in a pulpit to entertain. He is there to present Calvary in all its fullness of hope and glory.

Paul wrote of a mystery to be revealed: Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man the things which God hath prepared for them that love him (I Corinthians 2:9). The Christian is not a fool. He has an enlightened mind and he is speaking wisdom to those who can understand, speaking the wisdom of God in a mystery.

The natural man cannot understand the things of the spirit of God simply because he has never received of the spirit of God. To him the gospel is foolishness. In verses 10, 11 & 12, Paul makes it very plain that it is only through the Holy Spirit that the Word of God can be understood and received.

LESSON SIX SELF HELP TEST

A. Write a paragraph describing the city of Corinth.

B. What was the purpose of this letter?

C. Write out the key verse found in chapter one.

D. List those whom God uses. Why?

E. How is true wisdom imparted?