
2 Corinthians

Lesson 1

“Introduction”

Objective: To explore the ancient text of 2 Corinthians in order to understand more fully and completely the call of God for us today as we seek to live out our lives in service to the Kingdom of God, to His glory, His Honor and His will. These ancient texts can challenge us, and inspire us, to live life more fully as participants in God’s story of redemption and love. At the core, the hope and desire for doing this study is that we will be continually transformed more fully and completely into useful instruments in the hands of God for bringing His message of love and compassion, and life to every creature.

Materials: The Bible, Commentaries, journal articles, dictionaries, the internet and other resources as may be appropriate. It is also our hope that each person will bring to the discussion and class times the things that God has placed upon their heart through their unique journey as people seeking the face of God and the life He seeks to bring.

Procedures

1. To explore biblically and logically what matters most to God in order to understand how we are to live. This will entail exploring the background of these texts in order to understand more fully their intended meaning for their original target audience.
2. We will also seek to explore how these ancient texts, addressed to ancient peoples, should, and must challenge us today in our walk of faith and obedience to the will of God.

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 - 3.** We intend in each instance to offer some practical suggestions as to how the call of God, through His Apostle, Paul, calls us to live our lives in such a way as to reflect our confident hope and expectation in the power of God. We seek the face of God.

The ancient city of Corinth was set in a particularly advantageous situation in that it not only sat on the ancient land route between the East and the West, but also several sea routes converged upon its two harbors.¹ The ancient city was located about 48 miles west of Athens on the narrow stretch of land that joins the Peloponnese to the mainland of Greece. In time, Corinth would become a rival, and even surpass the great city of Athens in power and honor. During the time of Paul this was certainly the case as Corinth, not Athens became the Roman provincial capital.

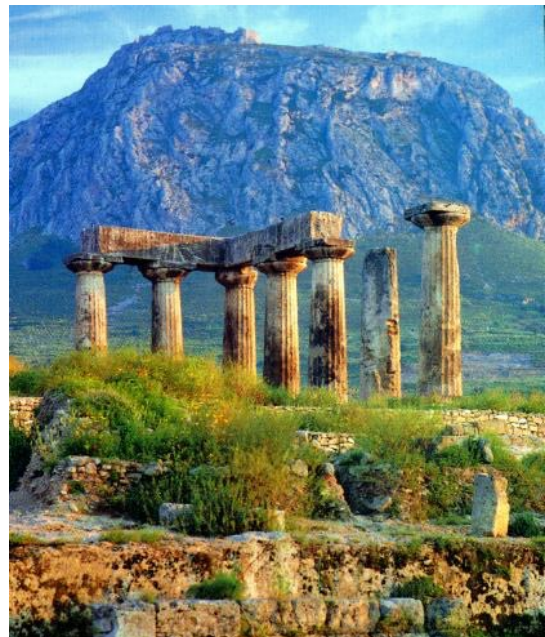


¹ Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, third edition revised in one (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 1970), p. 421.

Corinth played a major role in the missionary work of the Apostle Paul. The site of this ancient city was first inhabited in the Neolithic period (5000-3000 B.C.) and flourished as a major Greek City from the 8th century B.C. until it was destroyed by the Romans in 146 B.C. by the Roman general Lucius Mummius.² This City controlled the narrow strip of land that separates the Peloponnese from northern Greece as can be seen from the map supplied above. Corinth also controlled what was called the *diolkos* (Greek for “haul across”), which was a 6th century B.C. stone paved road that connected the Saronic Gulf with the Gulf of Corinth. This overland route was highly valuable in that it allowed passengers and cargo to avoid the difficult, and time consuming trip around the southern end of the Peloponnese. All of these features brought great wealth and power to this city.

Corinth was also known for its worship of the pagan gods of Greece.

Beginning in 582 B.C., every second year,



² James R. Harrison, “Introduction: Excavating the Urban Life of Roman Corinth, in James R. Harrison and L. L. Welborn, *The First Urban Churches 2 Roman Corinth*, in the Writings from the Greco-Roman World Supplement Series, Number 8 (Atlanta GA: SBL Press, 2016), pp. 1-45.

in the spring the great Isthmian Games were held in honor of the sea god Poseidon. The great Doric Temple of Apollo was constructed in the city in 550 B.C. The City was conquered by Philip II of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great, in 338 B.C. After the assassination of Philip, Alexander immediately traveled to Corinth to meet with the confederacy and to confirm his leadership. At the Isthmian Games of 336 B.C. the Greeks chose Alexander to lead them in the war against the Persians. This is a city of power and prominence in the ancient world, it was also a city powerfully associated with religion, pleasure, and conflict. Corinth was largely destroyed by the Romans in 146 B.C. (though there is dispute about the full extent of this destruction),³ but rebuilt in 44 B.C. as a Roman city under Julius Caesar.

As a Roman city Corinth prospered more than ever before and may have had as many as 800,000 inhabitants by the time of Paul. It was the capital of Roman Greece (instead of



³ James R. Harrison, "Introduction: Excavating the Urban Life of Roman Corinth, in James R. Harrison and L. L. Welborn, *The First Urban Churches 2 Roman Corinth*, in the Writings from the Greco-Roman World Supplement Series, Number 8 (Atlanta GA: SBL Press, 2016), pp. 1-45.

Athens) and was primarily populated by freedmen and Jews. Being rebuilt by the Romans, and as a Roman provincial capital this meant that this new city took on a very Roman look and that it would be ruled by a form of Roman government with Roman officials and would be chiefly colonized by Romans. These Romans would largely be some of Caesar's veterans along with urban plebeians, freedman and woman from Rome itself and some Romanized Greeks (cf. Strabo 8.6.23; 17.3.15). In part, the creating of this Roman colony was a way of rewarding veterans with land for their years of service to the empire, but it was also a shrewd means of removing disaffected and potentially volatile elements from the capital, Rome.⁴ This was one of the ways that Rome dealt with their retiring war veterans, who if disenfranchised negatively affected the entire Roman empire.

There were some Greeks who had remained in this area around Corinth, living in the ruins, but once the Roman colony was established here they became resident aliens - *incolae* - and it was the new Roman colonists and their descendants who were reckoned as citizens (*cives*). The *incolae* were not permitted to

⁴ Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth* (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), pp. 6-7.

hold office, though apparently some of them were allowed to vote. In order to be a member of the local senate (the *decurio*), even a citizen had to meet either a stiff property qualification, or be elected either as a city business manager (*aedile*), or as a chief magistrate (*duovir*). Roman Corinth was never simply a “Hellenistic” city. If you took the city as a whole the architectural, artifactual, and inscriptional evidence points to a trend in the first century to Romanize the remains of the old city that went far beyond simply making Latin the official language and Roman law the rule of the city. There is evidence that the buildings of the rebuilt city of Corinth were patterned after buildings in southern Italian cities like Pompeii. There is evidence that significant quantities of Italian wares were imported into Corinth, which again tells us a great deal about the makeup of the population of Corinth. The people of Corinth lived within an honor-shame cultural orientation in which public recognition was often more important than facts and where the worst thing that could happen was for a person’s reputation to be publicly tarnished. In such a culture, a person’s sense of worth is based on recognition by others of one’s accomplishments, and because of this there are a

great many self-promoting inscriptions that have been excavated throughout the ancient ruins of the city. One's honor was based on the recognition by others of one's accomplishments.⁵

In a great many ways, this is totally contrary to our current societal norms in the U.S. We have become a society that seems to devalue honor and to recognize shame less and less as we focus on the individual rather than the group, or the society. This difference affects not only our theology it affects how we perceive morality and the world that surrounds us. Because of this there are major generational differences producing fragmentation in our society all across our country. This has led to deep divisions within the church too, and has caused churches that hold to older, more established values, to lose membership among the younger more highly individualistic, hedonistic individuals of our modern society. All churches must learn how to deal with this trend in a way that will promote the way of God and the society that He envisions if we are to continue to move as those who have been "called forth" by God to join in His "Community," the church (*ekklesia*). God Himself lives in community and He calls His

⁵ Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth*, pp. 7-8.

people to bear His image by living in loving, compassionate, life-giving communities of faith and holiness. In the same way that God called the ancient people of Corinth to community He now calls twenty-first century Americans to live in community.

The factors that affected the ancient people of Corinth and their social situation will come into play over and over again throughout the letters of 1 and 2 Corinthians, where boasting, preening, false pride and such are common topics addressed by Paul. Despite the fact that the Corinthian Christians were converted to a new religious orientation they still brought with them much of the baggage from their former lives. They brought many of their previous social values which they had gained over a lifetime and even over generations, and sometimes this baggage varied based on what religious and social organizations they had previously participated with at whatever level. Paul, in his letters, attempts to further the converts resocialization by deinculturating them from many of their former values. He does this by invoking certain eschatological ideas and the ethical implications of those

ideas.⁶ He wants them to understand the future plan that God has for the world and that there will at some point be a reckoning.

As indicated above, in 27 B.C., Corinth became the capital of the Roman senatorial province of Achaia. This status was later revoked under Tiberius and then once again restored under Claudius. This meant that an honor temporarily lost under the reign of Tiberius was restored; a fact that is underscored by Gallio's arraignment of Paul in Corinth at the Bema (Acts 18:12-17).⁷ All of this change in status must have had an impact on the inhabitants and may be in part be behind some of the ways that Paul addressed the church there. In particular, steering them away from being accommodating to Rome in their fickle treatment of the colony and steering them toward the firm and secure dominion of Jesus Christ.⁸ We think that our politics can be

⁶ Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth*, pp. 8-9.

⁷ **But when Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him before the tribunal. ¹³They said, "This man is persuading people to worship God in ways that are contrary to the law." ¹⁴Just as Paul was about to speak, Gallio said to the Jews, "If it were a matter of crime or serious villainy, I would be justified in accepting the complaint of you Jews; ¹⁵but since it is a matter of questions about words and names and your own law, see to it yourselves; I do not wish to be a judge of these matters." ¹⁶And he dismissed them from the tribunal. ¹⁷Then all of them seized Sosthenes, the official of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the tribunal. But Gallio paid no attention to any of these things. NRSV**

⁸ James R. Harrison, "Introduction: Excavating the Urban Life of Roman Corinth, in James R. Harrison and L. L. Welborn, *The First Urban Churches 2 Roman Corinth*, in the Writings from the Greco-Roman World Supplement Series, Number 8 (Atlanta GA: SBL Press, 2016), pp. 1-45.

volatile and corrupt today, we have nothing on ancient Rome.

Tiberius disenfranchises a whole province in a political move that punished the former loyalist families of Julius Caesar.

The Apostle Paul visited Corinth sometime in the 50s A.D. and later wrote at least four letters to the Christian community at Corinth. Two of those four letters are preserved and are what we today call First and Second Corinthians. When Paul first visited Corinth (51 or 52 A.D.), Gallio, the brother of the famous Seneca, was proconsul of Corinth. Paul lived in Corinth for eighteen months (Acts 18:1-18), and worked as a tentmaker, converting as many Jews and pagans as he could during that time. It is at Corinth that Paul first became acquainted with Aquila and Priscilla, who became fellow-workers with him there. Paul stopped in Corinth a second time and stayed about three months (2 Corinthians 1:15; Acts 20:3) after a not so successful visit to Athens. He made his home, on this visit, with Aquila and Priscilla, who had been exiled from Rome. He began evangelistic work in the synagogue, but after a short time, owing to opposition, he turned to the Gentiles making use of the house of Titius Justus. His efforts among the Gentiles resulted in many coming to belief.

This created a church in Corinth made up of both Jews and Gentiles.⁹ A truly volatile and potentially explosive mixture of cultures and values.

As you might imagine, bringing these quite disparate cultures together generated a plethora of problems. I think that very often we forget that what prompted the writing of the letters to Corinth was not that the Corinthian church stood as a beacon of light, righteousness, and good practice, but this was a very troubled, fragmented, and ignorant church that needed guidance and discipline. This was a church that clearly misunderstood much of the Christian message, and Paul sought to guide them, discipline them, and to create understanding of the message of the Gospel and how it was to be lived out in daily life. There is much about the situation in Corinth that was unique and different from our lifestyle today, but there is also much that is similar too. This was a prosperous, powerful, city that stood to gain much by their devotion to their government and commerce. Corinth was renowned for its fine luxury items and for the calibre and variety of what was on offer there. This included far more than simply

⁹ Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, p. 421.

goods, there was a moral laxity and an intellectual pride that was bound to put the church on a collision course with their pagan environment.¹⁰

This was a City dominated by the marketplace and temples and an increasing level of manufacturing over time. There was a close connection between the temples, religion, and certainly much that went on in the marketplace and even in manufacturing that affected the cultural flavor of Corinth. In the world in which we live we do not give much, if any, thought to the possibility that the meat in the market might have been sacrificed to an idol, a pagan god. In the ancient world however, almost all meat had been sacrificed to some god, or another. In that day, you would take your animal to the temple of your choice and not to the packing house, or butcher. Part of the meat would be offered to the god, with some possibly being burned in fire, some was given to the priests, and some was given to the one offering the sacrifice. What was sold in the market was then some of that which had either been given to the priests, or perhaps some of the surplus given to the original person making the sacrifice. There were no

¹⁰ Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, pp. 421-422.

refrigerated units, and no freezers to store meat. It could only be kept for a very limited period. Many times it would not be possible to ascertain which god had been offered the meat sold in the market, but you could be almost certain that it had been sacrificed to some god. Seldom was an animal killed, and sold, without sacrificial ritual being involved.

This was one of the issues that Paul would address in his writings to the church at Corinth and the fact that the church was composed of both Jews and Gentiles compounded this problem as they each had very different viewpoints regarding the eating of meat sacrificed to idols. These two groups will have held very different views on how to deal with this issue. For the Gentiles eating this meat will have likely been as normal as us going to the grocery store is today. For the Jews, however, there were deep concerns about the provenance of the meat. After all, God called his people to be holy and set apart. Such disputes were a major issue, especially in this fledgling church that had no traditions, or precedents to assist them in dealing with matters such as this. They also had little leadership that would have been accepted by both sides; and as is normally the case where there is a vacuum of

power something, or someone, comes into fill that space. Paul's letters are meant to correct error, provide structure, and understanding so that the church could deal with these issues and the new ones that would arise over time as they sought to live in community.

Corinth as a City was known in the first century for having a ruthless competitive spirit and this spirit is perhaps best symbolized by its position as the first Greek City to have Roman gladiatorial contests (Dio Chrysostom 31.121). Corinth was a place that drew large numbers through tourism. This was especially the case every two years when the Isthmian games were held at least as early as A.D. 3. These games were likely held in A.D. 49 and 51, at least one time while Paul was in the city. The quadrennial Imperial, and Caesarean Games were also held in Corinth periodically. Corinth also had a long history of being visited by religious pilgrims coming to see the famous temple of Aphrodite which stood on the mountain overlooking Corinth, the Acro-Corinth. Aphrodite was the goddess of love, beauty, and fertility, and she was considered to be the patroness of prostitutes. She was also the patroness of seafarers, a combination that was

likely to promote a lot of interaction. In the temple of Aphrodite, Strabo informs us that in classical times this temple had many sacred prostitutes (*Geography* 8.6.20c), but we are not certain that this practice was revived on the same scale in Roman Corinth.¹¹

Corinth was a City noted for its diversity of religions, ethnicities, political views, and morals. This was truly a nexus point for the interaction of diversity in the ancient world. It is in this tremendous mix that Paul seeks to create a united, moral, faithful community of Christians. It is amazingly difficult for us to even begin to imagine the tremendous diversity that Paul will have encountered as he sought to fulfill his mission of planting a church in this ancient provincial capital and crossroads. As we examine the text of this work I hope we will seek to comprehend how, through Paul, God sought to form his people into a faithful, loving, and compassionate people with which to tell the story of God among people who were accustomed to frequently hearing new stories about gods and religions. As we read the words of this text we will need strive to use our imaginations and minds to envision not only the message that Paul was trying to

¹¹ Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth*, pp. 12-13.

communicate to his original audience, but why it is that he communicated that particular message. Paul sought to create unity of thought, mission, morals and even desires among this diverse group. I believe that there is much that we can learn that will assist us in our modern day mission of creating community, pursuing God, and unleashing compassion.


Synopsis

The ancient City of Corinth was an extremely powerful, cosmopolitan, and immoral city in the day of Paul. Its strategic location was a great asset to it as it served as one of the main crossroads between the East and the West. This City was also very Roman in character with it being reestablished during the time of Julius Caesar as place to settle former soldiers who had completed their time of service. These factors, and the religious makeup of this City, made the population an extremely diverse and varied group. It was from this diverse and varied group that Paul would seek to form a community of Christians that would proclaim the light of this new faith into a world filled with religious diversity and variety. He would seek to create a sense of unity and cohesion along ideological and spiritual lines that would mold this community into a beacon of light in a sea of darkness.

The challenges that Paul faced were multiplied by the character of this large City which was made up of Jews and Gentiles who will have held extremely disparate views of the world and of religion. This community will also have been on a path of Romanization pulling them further and further into the

ideals of Rome and its leaders. The ideals of this community were diametrically opposed to the message of Paul and the followers of Jesus, thus increasing the tension between the Christians and their community. These pressures can be seen in the many struggles that this community had that created the need for Paul to write to them at least four times. This was a church that was struggling to be a community, a community that Paul tried to orient around the Gospel message; a message proclaimed in a manner that was not appealing in so many ways to their cultural identities. As Romans they valued power, flair, flamboyance, and rhetorical eloquence, all of the things that Paul did not exhibit in the traditionally accepted manner. So Paul used his letters to seek to reorient their perspectives in such a way as to get them to value things that are important and useful to God such as weakness, humility, persistence, morality, and godliness.

In this crossroads, Paul strives to get these disciples of Christ to recognize the reality of the world in the light of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ as not only world changing, but as culture, and life-changing events that call for a reorientation of priorities. Paul seeks to weld this community



together in a fashion that will allow them exhibit these new perspectives and values to all who would care to see. He challenges the Corinthians to live life in light of the cross and not for family, power, wealth, luxury and personal comfort. He seeks to create a community that can withstand the onslaught of the forces of darkness in a manner that would allow them to achieve the goal of reaching the reward of eternal life.

Questions

1. What are some of the temptations that come because of living in a wealthy, powerful, and pluralistic society?
2. Why do you think morals are important, or are they?
3. How do you think cultural morals should be established?
4. How do you decide upon rules of behavior within your own family? Why?
5. What are some ways that the society in which we live affects our families and our churches? Why?
6. What role do you believe the Bible should play in how we live our lives today? Why?
7. Do you think participating in something that someone else considers immoral should be considered okay? What are some examples? Why do you believe this, or not believe this?
8. How should being part of a community affect our morals? Why?
9. What are some ways that your family enforces moral imperatives?
10. How do you believe that the church should encourage moral imperatives among its members?
11. What role do you believe “shame” plays in modern society? Why?

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12. How would you define “honor?”
 13. What role do you think “honor” plays in community building? Why?
 14. What role do you think “shame” should play in community building? Why?
 15. What do you think we should learn from ancient letters written to ancient churches? Why?
 16. How can your church community assist you in following God in the twenty-first century?
 17. What are some ways that you as an individual can help build community in your church and your family?