

# THE CROSS IN CORINTH

by Ray C. Stedman

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As we continue our study of Acts into the eighteenth chapter we see the Apostle Paul leaving Athens, the intellectual capital of the Roman world, and coming into Corinth, the center of sensuality. These two cities are symbols of the twin evils which, in every day and every generation, trap and enslave the hearts of people: intellectual pride and sensual lust.

Corinth is about fifty miles west of Athens, and, when Paul visited it, was the capital of the Roman province of Greece, which they called Achaia. It was a center of commerce and trade, located on a narrow neck of land between the Adriatic Sea and the Aegean Sea. The Greeks had built a skidway across that narrow isthmus over which they actually dragged small ships on greased skids. It was a very beautiful city located in a magnificent natural setting.

When I was there, two years ago, I marveled at the beauty of the region. It was a resort, filled with beautiful temples and other buildings of various kinds.

It was also the center of the worship of Aphrodite, the goddess of sex. There was a great temple of Aphrodite on the Acrocorinth, the hill in back of the city, from which every evening a thousand priestesses of the temple would come down into the city streets to ply their trade, indulging in the worship of sex. Thus Corinth had gained a reputation throughout the whole Roman world as the center of sensuality. Whenever a citizen of Corinth was portrayed in a drama, it was as rather loose, morally, and usually as a drunk.

So this is the city to which the apostle came, walking all alone in the dust of the road. It was, in other words, a typical Californian city.

It was infested with certain strongholds of evil which the apostle describes in his first letter to the Corinthians -- places where evil was entrenched and was difficult to dislodge. Sexual license and perversion were rampant. Racial discord was prominent. There were family feuds and political tyranny. And, of course, spreading over all, was the emptiness, meaninglessness, and the lack of purpose which paganism always produces.

Corinth was so much like our own cities that, as I have mentioned before, I often refer to Paul's letters to the church at Corinth as his first and second letters to the Californians. We live in Corinthian conditions, and if there is any church in the New Testament with which we would particularly identify, it is this one.

The apostle arrived a total stranger, not knowing anyone, never having been there before, but confident that God would open the door. Luke tells us how he did it:

**After this he left Athens and went to Corinth. And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, lately come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. And he went to see them; and because he was of the same trade he stayed with them, and they worked, for by trade they were tentmakers. And he argued in the synagogue every sabbath, and persuaded Jews and Greeks. {Acts 18:1-4 RSV}**

Paul is following the familiar pattern we have seen before. When he came into a city he began in the synagogue. But here he needed to make a living as well, and so he worked at his trade of tentmaking. He always expected God to lead him to someone who would open the door to a city, and, probably in the marketplace, he ran into a fellow Jew who was also a tentmaker. This was Aquila, who, with his wife Priscilla, had just been driven out of Rome by the decree of the Emperor Claudius that all Jews must leave Rome. Since they were of the same trade they worked together. And, as you can well imagine, it was not very long before Paul led Aquila and Priscilla to Christ. These two are frequently mentioned in the pages of

Scripture as faithful workers and helpers of the apostle. In fact, they soon go with him from Corinth to Ephesus.

Paul led them to Christ while he was at work. I hope that will encourage some of you to use work as a place for getting to know people, getting to understand their needs, and as a normal place for evangelism -- but not on company time. Work is an excellent place to make contacts with people who are searching for answers in life. When Silas and Timothy rejoined the apostle, arriving from Thessalonica, Paul altered his procedure. We read,

**When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with preaching, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus. And when they opposed and reviled him, he shook out his garments and said to them, "Your blood be upon your heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles." And he left there and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God; his house was next door to the synagogue. Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord, together with all his household; and many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized. {Acts 18:5-8 RSV}**

Here is the account of a great period of success in the opening weeks at Corinth. Paul taught in the Jewish synagogue and, as usual, it was not very long until the preaching of a crucified Christ aroused the hatred and the enmity of these Jews. As long as Paul dwelt upon the predictions concerning the Messiah which spoke of his glory, and power, and of his ruling over the nations, the Jews were quite ready to accept that Jesus was that One. But when he mentioned the crucifixion it became a terrible stumbling block to them because this cut right to the heart of their Jewish pride. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul speaks of the fact that the word of the cross is to the Jews a stumbling block {cf, 1 Cor 1:23}. It aroused such enmity that they opposed him and reviled him, openly attacked him and sneered at him.

Finally he shook his garments against them in the Jewish gesture of detachment, and said, "If you will not receive this message I will go to the Gentiles." (That applied only to Corinth because the next place he went he started in the synagogue again.) But he did not go very far. There is a little humor here. He went right next door. In fact, from the Greek text it is clear that the house of Titius Justus and the synagogue actually shared a common wall. That had its effect because the first thing we read about after his move is that Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, was won to Christ. He believed in the Lord, together with all his household. So Paul still had access to the synagogue. And among the other citizens of Corinth there was a tremendous response. Many who heard Paul believed and were baptized.

It is very instructive to note that, though there are some people who claim that Paul did not believe in baptism, everywhere he went his converts were always baptized. As he says in his letter to these Corinthians, he did not very often do it himself because he did not want them bragging that the apostle had baptized them. But obviously Silas and Timothy helped him with it, and all of these converts were baptized.

The next section of this account reveals the inside story of Paul's reaction to the city of Corinth, which is very interesting:

**And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, "Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man shall attack you to harm you; for I have many people in this city." And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them. {Acts 18:9-11 RSV}**

What the Lord literally said when he appeared to Paul in this night vision was, "Stop being afraid, but keep right on speaking." This reveals that Paul was indeed becoming afraid. It is quite understandable that he would, for a very familiar pattern was developing. He had seen it before many times. He had come to the synagogue and spoken to the Jews. They had rejected his message. He turned to the Gentiles and there was immediate response, a great flood of people coming in. This aroused the anger and hostility of the Jews, and he knew that the next step was Trouble, spelled with a capital *T*. He anticipated that he would soon be ousted from the city by some arousing of the rabble, or of the authorities.

Is that not beautifully descriptive of the humanity of this man? We sometimes think of Paul as being so bold, so fearless -- yet he suffered just as we do from apprehensions, forebodings, and fears. In fact in a letter to these very Corinthians he says so. In First Corinthians 2, he says, "When I came to you, ... I was with you in weakness and in much fear and trembling;" {1 Cor 2:1a, 2:3 RSV}. He was very much afraid of what would happen to him there.

The reason, of course, was that the city was responding to the gospel and the strongholds of evil were being broken down. The entrenched powers of darkness were being shaken. The life of the city was being disrupted by the awakening which was spreading because of Paul's teaching. To these same Corinthians he will later write, "...for the weapons of our warfare are not worldly [fleshly] but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every proud obstacle to the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ," {2 Cor 10:4-5 RSV}. Some of these strongholds of darkness and evil were being shaken.

After all, that is the only legitimate mark of the success of a church. I find many churches today that measure their success by what is going on *in the congregation*. It is wonderful to have things happening within the congregation, but that is not the mark of success. The church is successful only when things start happening *in the world*. The Lord Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth ... you are the light of the world," {Matt 5:13a, 5:14a RSV}. It is the world that God is aiming at. Until something starts happening in the community, the church is a failure.

This is so evident in our day. It bothers me greatly to come into a city and find it filled with church buildings on every side, but to find also that the city is locked into patterns of violence and hatred, riot and bloodshed. It tells me that there is something seriously wrong with the churches of that city, for God always aims at the world. All the evils we have in our modern day were present back then in Corinth to afflict the people. But now this radical, revolutionary message of the gospel was striking right at the very core of the life of the city, breaking down the patterns of evil that had locked men and women into bondage and slavery to sensuality, to drugs, and to many other forms of corruption. As the apostle saw this beginning to happen, he knew that he was in for trouble.

I must confess that I have a somewhat similar sense of foreboding myself. We are seeing so many wonderful things happening right here today, so much that is touching the life of our community around us, that we on the staff ask ourselves almost every week, "How much longer is this going to last before something changes, before Satan strikes back, and trouble breaks out, and we are confronted with hostility and perhaps even violence against the message of Christ?"

But this is why the Lord appeared to the apostle. How gracious and reassuring are his words! He says, in effect, "Paul, don't let your fears grip you! Stop being afraid and don't keep silent, but keep right on preaching, because I am going to protect you. No one is going to set upon you and hurt you, for I have a lot of work for you to do yet in this city. There are many people here who haven't come to me yet but who will -- if you keep on preaching."

I could not help but think, when I read those words, of how, in football, the quarterback is protected this way. His teammates form a pocket around him and the quarterback drops back into the pocket. There he is protected in order that he might continue the assault. That is exactly what the Lord is saying to Paul. "Paul, don't worry. You see the hostility, you see the opposition, you see it all coming, but I have built a pocket around you. You keep on throwing that ball, because there are a lot of people yet to be reached in this city."

Some of the Lord's most encouraging words are, "I have yet many people in this city." They were still pagans, they had not yet become Christians -- but the Lord knew they were there. There is nothing more encouraging to me in going into any strange situation than the realization that God has brought me into that place because there are people there whom he already knows about and who will respond to what I have to say. That gives me a great deal of support in preaching the truth. So it was with the apostle. He was greatly strengthened, and, for a year and a half, he continued in Corinth without being molested. He was able to preach the truth until there was a great stirring in this city. The church at Corinth became a large church, and was strong, and powerful in its effect upon the life of the city.

It was during this period also that Paul wrote his first and second letters to the Thessalonians, the earliest of Paul's letters that we have in our Bible. Paul undoubtedly wrote to other churches during this time -- letters that we do not possess. There is mention in the New Testament of some that were not preserved. The Thessalonian letters, however, were preserved because they contain the full-orbed teaching of the New Covenant which it is necessary that we know.

When the attack against Paul finally does come, you notice that God's hand is still in control over it:

**But when Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack upon Paul and brought him before the tribunal, saying, "This man is persuading men to worship God contrary to the law." But when Paul was about to open his mouth, Gallio said to the Jews, "If it were a matter of wrongdoing or vicious crime, I should have reason to bear with you, O Jews; but since it is a matter of questions about words and names and your own law, see to it yourselves; I refuse to be a judge of these things." And he drove them from the tribunal. And they all seized Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the tribunal. But Gallio paid no attention to this. {Acts 18:12-17 RSV}**

This tribunal has been excavated and if you visit Corinth you can see it. It is called in Greek, the *bema*, the scale, i.e., the judgment seat. When I was there I walked around in this bema and tried to visualize the apostle standing in front of this well-known prosecutor and judge of Rome. Gallio is mentioned in secular history. He is the older brother of the philosopher, Seneca, who at this very time was busy tutoring the young Nero -- who would become the next emperor after Claudius. Gallio is mentioned several times in extant literature from that day. He was said to be a very just man, with a gracious and mild disposition. Here he appears to be very impartial.

The charge brought against Paul by these Jews was that he was violating the Roman law against beginning a new religion. "This man is persuading men to worship God contrary to the law." They did not mean the Jewish Law; they meant the Roman law. Evidently these Jews supported this charge with arguments concerning Paul's preaching of Christ. But Gallio was a very astute individual who furnishes us an example of how God often uses governmental authorities to preserve the peace, and to permit the gospel to go forth. Before Paul could open his mouth to defend himself, the judge threw the case out of court. He refused jurisdiction. He said to the Jews, "Look, if this man had committed a crime, or had done something wrong, I would judge him. But it is obvious to me that all you are talking about are some silly semantic distinctions between your own Jewish religious factions. Therefore it has nothing to do with Roman law."

That was a very important decision! It meant that Paul was now free to preach the gospel everywhere throughout the Roman empire without being charged with breaking the Roman law. Gallio, in effect, said that Christianity, in the eyes of the Romans, was officially a Jewish sect -- it was a part of Judaism. And Judaism was an established, official religion within the empire. This is what made it possible for Paul to preach in many Roman cities without any difficulty with the officials.

And the Jews (again you see the humor of this account) were so upset by this outcome that they seized their leader, Sosthenes, and beat him up in front of the tribunal. They vented their spite on him. When Crispus became a Christian he was no longer the ruler of the synagogue, so Sosthenes took his place and led the attack against Paul. But when he mismanaged the affair so badly that the whole thing was thrown out of court, the Jews beat him up right in the presence of the Roman judge. All this left Gallio quite unconcerned. (The King James Version says that the Greeks beat Sosthenes, but this reading is not supported by the best manuscripts in the original language.)

Now, the beating did Sosthenes a lot of good. If you turn to *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* you will find a most interesting item in the very first verse:

**Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes, {1 Cor 1:1 RSV}**

I have never considered beating as a method of Christian evangelism before, but it worked in this case.

Evidently Sosthenes' eyes were opened when these Jews turned against him, and he decided that maybe their cause was not so just after all. He gave heed to the gospel, and now, here he is, a co-laborer with Paul in spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ. All this is a beautiful picture of how, behind the scenes, God stands watching over his own. Do you remember that poem of James Russell Lowell?

Truth forever on the scaffold,  
wrong forever on the throne.  
Yet that scaffold sways the future,  
and behind the dim unknown  
Standeth God amid the shadows,  
keeping watch above his own.

That was so characteristic of Paul's ministry during these days. Luke traces the end of the second missionary journey with just a few words:

**After this Paul stayed many days longer, and then took leave of the brethren and sailed for Syria, and with him Priscilla and Aquila. At Cenchreae he cut his hair, for he had a vow. And they came to Ephesus, and he left them there; but he himself went into the synagogue and argued with the Jews. When they asked him to stay for a longer period, he declined; but on taking leave of them he said, "I will return to you if God wills," and he set sail from Ephesus.**

**When he had landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church, and then went down to Antioch. {Acts 18:18-22 RSV}**

Paul started his second missionary journey from Antioch and now Luke brings us to its close, back there again.

Several things are worthy of note in this paragraph. Paul stayed in Corinth a long time after Gallio dismissed his case. The Christian faith was now legally accepted so he had an open door and he used it to the full, preaching there for we do not know how much longer, perhaps as much as two full years.

At last he took leave of the brethren and, taking Priscilla and Aquila with him, he sailed from Cenchreae, one of the ports of Corinth. We have the interesting comment from Luke that there "he cut his hair, for he had a vow." That sounds very contemporary, does it not? Many people have taken a vow not to cut their hair these days. Or perhaps we could read this as though he had taken a vow to cut his hair.

I have been vowing that for the last two weeks but have not had the opportunity. It might sound as though that is what happened to Paul.

Actually, of course, it refers to a religious vow. According to the Law, this was a way of expressing thanks. He vowed that for thirty days he would not cut his hair but would give thanks to God and worship him. He also probably fasted during this period, refraining from certain foods. At the end of the thirty days he cut his hair, having fulfilled his vow. It was simply a Jewish way of giving thanks.

Some are disturbed by this, as though it means that Paul was reverting to all the old, legalistic practices of Judaism. Not at all. He simply is doing as he said in a letter to the Corinthians: "To the Jews I became a Jew; to the Gentiles ... a Gentile," {cf, 1 Cor 9:20-21 RSV}. Since he was working with the Jewish community he expressed, in this Jewish way, the thankfulness of his heart for God's protection over him while he was at Corinth. It was a perfectly proper thing for him to do. It does not indicate that when he came to the Gentiles he did not feel perfectly free to lay aside all Jewish ritual and to live as a Gentile. He was a man set free in Christ.

Their voyage brought them to Ephesus in the Roman province of Asia. Paul, you remember, earlier, had been forbidden by the Spirit to preach the word of the Lord in Ephesus, but now he is allowed to come in. He stays only a brief time. As usual he begins at the synagogue. They receive his message and ask him to stay longer, but he is in a hurry to get back to Jerusalem. So, the account says, he leaves Aquila and Priscilla and goes on, landing on the coast of Palestine at Caesarea, and "going up to greet the church," i.e., the church at Jerusalem.

He spent some time there, we do not know how much, doubtless reporting on what God had done.

Finally he came back to the church at Antioch from which he had begun his journey some two to three years before.

Now, what has God said to us in the account of this missionary journey of Paul?

We have seen developing, repeatedly, a pattern which these early Christians invariably followed whenever they came into a new city. And from that form of approach God always brought a new and creative program designed to meet the specific needs of the situation there.

One of the things this has taught me is that we make a great mistake by trying to find a program, and then to apply it to a situation. According to the New Testament, the early Christians always began with the preaching of the word. Then, as it won people to Christ, they began to have body life -- loving one another, praying for one another, understanding their spiritual gifts, and putting them to work. As the body of Christ began to operate, the rich and varied innovations of the Holy Spirit came into play, and adapted it and its activities to the specific situation. Thus the word went out with great power, and began to shake up the surrounding community within a relatively short period of time.

We need desperately to return to this pattern today. God is moving the church back to this pattern. I hope we learn, once and for all, the lesson of this section of Acts:

God is prepared to work:

- To bring down the strongholds of evil,
- To shake up a city,
- To shake up a neighborhood,
- To set men free,
- To open a door so that men and women who are locked into patterns of :
  - evil and darkness,
  - weakness and bondage, shall be set free in a relatively short period of time.

But that will happen only as the whole body of believers operates. This ministry is never reserved for just a handful of Christians. This has been the mistake made again and again in church history. Just a few, just a meager, dedicated few have been commissioned with the tasks of ministry -- counseling and helping, evangelizing and teaching, and upholding one another. But when that ministry becomes, as it was intended to be, the work of the entire body, then it is not very long before the world around begins to be changed.

God grant that we may return to the pattern set by the apostles during this time.

Think these things through, and ask yourself:

"Have I found my spiritual gift?" and

"Am I ministering with it as a member of the body of Christ?"

"Am I part of the moving of the body of Christ in this area, to accomplish what God wants done?"

### **Prayer:**

O Heavenly Father, we thank you for this account which encourages us, for we know that you are at work today just as you were then. The same sense of electric excitement can grasp and grip us as it did these early Christians. The same mighty power can be turned loose in communities that are in the grip of strongholds of darkness and evil, and these strongholds can be broken apart. The forces of evil can become demoralized in our area as the body of

Christ begins to function. Lord, help us who are members of that body to take due note of where we are, and what we are doing, and whether we are fulfilling the task committed to us by the Lord Jesus when he gave us spiritual gifts and the power of his resurrection, so that we may be working members of this body. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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