

# Corinth: The City Of This Age

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[ 0 : 00 ] We're looking at the city of Corinth today. Corinth was burned out completely in 146 BC and was rebuilt by Julius Caesar.

And by the time St. Paul hit Corinth, there's a sense in which we know about Corinth today, mainly because St. Paul did hit it.

So in the verses that we've read just now, in a sense, this is the city of Corinth being chiseled in the stone of history because of Paul's visit there.

For reasons that, well, you all will remember that. Greece looks like that.

And there actually is an isthmus there that's quite narrow, and that's where Corinth was on the end of that.

[ 1 : 15 ] And so a lot of shipping came in here and even was hauled over the isthmus to travel this way, that it was safer than going around here a lot of the time.

So Corinth was a great commercial and cosmopolitan city. Cosmopolitan in the sense that there were citizens of the world met there.

In the same way that downtown Vancouver strives to be fairly cosmopolitan, for citizens of the world to arrive here and to feel perfectly at home and wake up in the morning not sure whether they're in London, Cairo, New York, San Francisco, or Vancouver.

You know, we have created a little ethos. It's something that happens, I think, in our society that I... You know what the tourist world looks like. It's a very kind of fuzzy thing that... And you pay \$1,619 to go there for seven days with all your hotel room bills paid.

[ 2 : 25 ] And you spend the whole week in a mirage of some kind that gives you the appearance of things that they think you want to see. And what you really would like is just wants to shake hands with somebody who actually lives there.

But they manage to keep you free and that you only spend your time with people like yourself who are all looking to see somebody else. And in a sense, I think I read to you last week that thing that the city...

This is from Jacques Ellul's book, that the city is the master of illusions, that it can create all sorts of illusions. And what it does mainly is create illusions that make people happy and content and give them some sense of purpose.

So, I mean, that's the business. Do you remember that book? I was talking to Bill about it, *The Bodyguard of Lies*, which was titled that because Winston Churchill had said at some point that the truth is so important that it must be surrounded by a bodyguard of lies.

And so, in a sense, that that's the kind of world we live in. We live with a massive bodyguard of lies around the truth.

[ 3 : 57 ] The... I don't know how you feel about what the bad news that Michael Wilson brought to the whole of Canada yesterday.

It couldn't have been anything else but bad news because for the past month, everybody is saying the bad news is coming on Tuesday, the 20th of February.

So, it had to be bad news because everybody knew it was bad news. And maybe it was bad news. I am glad that I'm not in the position of most of you who have to decide whether, in fact, it was bad news or whether in the middle of it you can see some truth or some meaning which helps you.

I listen to bad news like that with the happy confidence that it won't happen to me. It probably won't affect me. But that's, I just, I think, part of the bodyguard of lies by which I protect myself from the world around me.

But this is the situation in which we live most of our lives. And somehow, in the midst of all this, whether we ever get in touch with the core truth is probably the critical factor.

[ 5 : 13 ] And, of course, that's what I want to talk about today because that's what happens here, is that Paul comes into this city and it's his business to try and tell people in Corinth where the truth is.

And the city of Corinth was a very immoral city. I read to you last week at the end about religion being, according to one group, the release of powerful irrational impulses through controlled ritual, a necessary cathartic or purge.

And that was a very sophisticated religion in Corinth as it was in Athens. But I find that fascinating. I sort of threw it at you at the end last week and I wanted you to spend a few minutes in meditation on this one. The release of powerful irrational impulses through controlled ritual, a necessary cathartic or purge.

And that a lot of people tend to think that's basically what religion is made up of, mostly made up of powerful irrational impulses that are an embarrassment to us all.

[ 6 : 41 ] So we try to go to church to control them and don't quite know what to do with them. And they're not only irrational, they're very often immoral.

And that's why it was significant that in Corinth, at the temple of Aphrodite, there were a thousand sacred prostitutes.

So that the whole religion of Corinth was to deal with the powerful irrational impulse towards sexual fulfillment.

And that that was tied right in with religion. Fascinating connection on which I don't intend to dwell. The issue though, that, I mean, this was the place that Paul was.

And I tell you this because I think Paul was really whipped by this situation. I think he really was downhearted and discouraged. Most people consider that having come from Athens where things didn't go that well and coming into this enormously commercially oriented place that was called Sin City, then, just as the BC report did a report on Vancouver recently and called it Sin City, for much the same reason.

[ 8 : 13 ] And that Paul just felt the enormous weight of the sophistication of this city and the kind of wisdom, pragmatic wisdom, by which the city of Corinth ran.

And that here he was to try and say in the midst of, you know, in the face of this steamroller, this juggernaut of a city coming to crush him and all this little group of Christians who were there, to try and say, no, I want you to stop, listen to the truth.

And he was just hammered in to the ground because all the values of that city and all the sort of motivation of that city was in a quite different direction to anything he had to say.

And what he would do in the city was difficult to imagine. And I think that it remains true that the city has this tremendous power.

And for you to try and break through the illusions of the city to any kind of encounter with truth. And remember that truth does not have to be acknowledged by truth as truth to be truth.

[ 9 : 35 ] You'll see how that works out later in the story. But truth could be truth whether anybody acknowledges it or not. You know, the whole city could be deceived.

And yet that wouldn't prove that the deception was for that reason true because everybody believed it. That's the kind of thing that Paul was up against.

And he went into the city. He found Aquila and Priscilla who were presumably, well, they were from Rome. And they had been thrown out of Rome because of this tension around the Christianity, which was already disturbing Rome.

And in order to deal with it, the Jews were all dismissed from Rome because of the way the Christians were behaving. And the Christians and Jews were so closely identified with one another that nobody who wasn't one of them thought that they were anything but one people.

And you'll find that that's still true here, that Jews and Christians were thought to be one people. So Aquila and Priscilla left there. They went to Corinth.

[ 10 : 47 ] They set up their tent-making business. Paul came along and joined with them and worked with them, earned his way. And on the Sabbath, he went into the synagogue and persuaded the, tried to persuade the people in the synagogue of the truth of the person of Christ.

He says, when he wrote the letter subsequently to the Corinthians, he said, I worked in weakness and from much trembling, not with wise, persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the spirit of power.

In a city where wise and persuasive words were the things that moved people and where power was all important, and here he was weak and trembling, trying to bear witness to the truth in a

synagogue where he was soon rejected.

And they threw him out. The result of them throwing him out of there was that they went into the house next door.

And Paul was testifying that Jesus was the Christ to a people whose purpose for existence was focused in looking for the Christ.

[12:06] And Paul went before them and said, here he is. Is he not the one you're looking for? And of course they said, no, he isn't. And they put out Paul as they rejected his testimony to the fact that Jesus was the Christ.

So Paul moved from there to the house next door. So that if you think of this as the synagogue here, and then this is the house next door, Paul moved from there to there.

Now, it seems to me that what I would like to do a whole history of the Christian church in terms of the number of times the church has had to move from the established institution to the house next door.

I mean, you have the story apparently in modern day Russia that for 50 years now, Christianity has survived largely in the house next door. And it's moved out of the great churches of Russia, which have been closed and made into museums, but it's apparently survived in small groups in houses. That same thing, I think, is happening in Vancouver today, that the institutional church has so lost touch with its message that most people who are seriously interested in the Christian faith are meeting in the house next door.

[13:35] Please don't quote me on any of that. That was just to provoke your thinking about it. I don't want to get involved in a long debate about that.

But you can see all through the history of the church that this kind of thing happens. And then there comes a time when it moves from the house next door back into the church.

But that's what happened here, that the message which Paul was bringing, which was the message they were looking for, they rejected. And so Paul moved into the house next door.

And it's interesting, if you read the account, he took with him as believers the leader of the synagogue and all his family. So they left the synagogue, and synagogues are always run by a lay leader, not by the clergy.

And so the lay leader of this synagogue went with Paul into the house next door, where Paul continued to preach, and because some help arrived, he was able to give himself full time to it.

[14:40] So that sometime, I guess, in the process of history, and in the confusion that happens when churches become involved in the society and in the world in which they seek to find a place and to find service, the message of the Christian faith, which is a very exclusive message concerning one person, Jesus Christ, that message is lost, and it's only retained as people move into the house next door and work on it.

That kind of thing seems to happen. And so that's what happened here, and it was as a result of that, that Crispus and his family and Titus Justice, whose house it was, and others were baptized. And baptism was a necessary thing for them, because they somehow had to say, with regard to the society in which they live, this is not where I belong, and this is where I belong, and baptism was the sacrament by which they said it.

So that when you are brought up in a Christian church, and you are baptized into a Christian church, and in a sense that Christian church has come to terms with you and your culture, and you come to terms with it as part of your culture, then it's not much to be baptized.

And that's why my friend Dick Lucas says, if you want to see what baptism means, see what happens when a Jew gets baptized. And you'll see that there's a real cleavage takes place.

[16:13] And a cleavage which is probably necessary for all of us in some way, in order to respect the fact that if you believe in Jesus Christ, you are fundamentally different.

Your whole value system shifts. Now you may not shift with it that rapidly, but you have put a foundation onto your life on which you are going to build for the rest of your life, and that foundation of your life is categorically different.

Everything is different. And you mark that when you come to put your faith in Jesus Christ by the outward and visible sign of baptism. And that goes back to this church, which was in operation by the year 50 A.D.

that was happening there. So that's what took place in the house next door. Then what happened to Paul was that in the next few verses, verse 9 following, was that he had a vision in the night.

And this again helps to see the condition in which Paul found himself. He was not winning the recognition either from the state of which he was a Roman citizen or from the Jewish community of which he was a born and bred and brought up member.

[ 17 : 43 ] He was experiencing rejection from them both, and he had to survive in that situation. And it remains true that a Christian has to have other resources on which to survive in our world.

And because only those resources will keep and sustain you. And the primary resource by which we are meant to live our life is our dependence upon and relationship to the person of Jesus Christ whom we encounter in the fellowship of Christians as they gather around the teaching of the Word of God in the Scriptures.

That relationship is essential. I was thinking if you were to take, for instance, the Beatitudes, blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the peacemakers, blessed are those who hunger and thirst, you've got just a category of losers all lined up for you when you're told these are the people of which I don't want to be one, even though I admire them immensely.

That kind of picture is what's given to you. And the only reason that they could be blessed is that they have resources which are other than the resources that most people in our society are living with.

They are quite different resources. And that's what happens to Paul. You get a picture of his resources. If you look in verse 9, that the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, do not be afraid.

[ 19 : 31 ] And he said that no doubt because Paul was afraid. I mean, fear is a subtle and pervasive reality that I don't think we recognize even in ourselves very often.

The toll that fear takes on us and the incapacity we suffer from because of its presence. Do not be afraid.

Speak and do not be silent. And of course, that's one of the great difficulties that we have is to speak our mind and our heart and not just to carry on with the glib conversation that's acceptable to everybody, but to speak the thing that God has given Paul to speak.

He's to continue to do it. And he's to do it against the fact that he is being categorically rejected over and over again and creating more and more hostility towards himself.

He's to go on saying it. You know, and it's, you know, when you're in the business of speaking publicly all the time, you know, you begin to know what people will accept and what they won't accept.

[ 20 : 45 ] And so you begin to adapt to what people want to hear. It was a great, I mean, I was brought up an Anglican in an Anglican church where people never said amen unless it was appropriate and it was in the book to say so.

And when I first went to a church and that had that sort of indiscriminate habit of when they approved of what you were saying, they would say amen.

And that was very exciting because you began to know how to get amen. You know, what words met with the kind of response that you were looking for.

It was fun. But dangerous stuff, I thought. Paul was told not to be silent and not to fear violence. You know, because the Lord said to him, I am with you and no man shall attack you to harm you. He said all those things to Paul and so that Paul was not to be afraid.

[ 21 : 54 ] He was not to shut up but to keep talking and he was not to fear violence to himself. And the reason for this vision that God gave him was the Lord said, I have many people in this city, which is, I think, a wonderful statement.

If you think about it, that there were people in that city who were God's people. And the only way that they would be able to identify themselves as God's people and that they would ultimately become identified as God's people was when they encountered the gospel, when they encountered the proclamation concerning the person of Jesus Christ.

Then it would happen that people would make the discovery, that's who I am. I am that person for whom Christ died.

They suddenly discover themselves to be God's people. You know how the Presbyterians get into trouble with predestination and all that kind of stuff. And if you read through the articles in the theology of most Christian churches, they say, well, God chose you, you didn't choose him.

But every time you go to church, you're asked, will you choose God tonight? Well, what if I do? Well, the fact is, if you do, then the next morning you will be told you didn't choose God last night, God chose you.

[ 23 : 26 ] Well, then why didn't he say so first? Well, it's hard to get the balance in there, to get that thing in perspective, that when we choose him, it's because he has already chosen us.

And that's what I think the Lord means when he says to Paul, I have many people in this city. Well, that was the encouragement Paul was to have.

Paul didn't know who they were, he knew they were there, and he knew he had to keep on talking until they came out of the woodwork, so to speak, and identified themselves.

And of course they did, and the Corinthians becomes one of the most dynamic Christian communities in the whole of the New Testament. One and a half minutes, look.

What happened then was that the Jews created a scene. They all came out, and they all accused Paul, and they said he was acting not according to the law for worshiping God.

[ 24 : 30 ] And what I think, in a sense, they were saying was, the Jews have the right to worship in Corinth. Paul is not a Jew, therefore punish him. And Galileo, the proconsul, said, doesn't mean anything to me.

He hasn't done anything wrong. You work out the problem yourself. As far as I'm concerned, he's just as much a Jew as any of you. And get out of my court. And so he kicked him all out.

In the course of being kicked out, they turned on the leader of the synagogue, whose name was Sosthenes, and they beat him up, hoping that they could attract Galileo's attention and that he would force the issue.

But Galileo paid no attention to it, and they could beat up their own leader if they wanted to. And so the case was dismissed. But there's a lovely...

There's a lovely reference to this, which comes subsequently. Sosthenes was beaten up in the courtroom as the leader of the synagogue that had rejected Paul.

[ 25 : 38 ] Some years later, when Paul writes his first letter to the Corinthians, he says to the saints in Corinth, I and my brother Sosthenes send greetings.

So you see how Paul, not being afraid, keeping on talking, knowing that there were people hidden in the city who were God's people, and one of them, unknown to himself at the time, was Sosthenes, the leader of the synagogue.

And he came to a place of a profession of faith in Christ. So it's an amazing thing, isn't it? And that the purpose, I suppose, of our existence is that in this city, that Christ may be proclaimed so that the people who are his will know that they are his and will be able to serve him.

Let me say a prayer and then go. Our God, we feel the terrible weight of the city around us and the pressure that it brings on all of us and the way it makes us think, the way it makes us talk, the fears it engenders in our hearts and the hopes and aspirations, the gratifications that it gives to us.

And all these things come to us and we wonder where in the midst of it all is the truth.

[ 27 : 11 ] Grant us to know the truth as we encounter the person of your Son, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.