

Grace, the Cross, and the Community of Faith

1 Corinthians 1:1–18

Wednesday, March 4, 2026

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Archaeological Moment: Paul and the Church at Corinth

Before we open the text tonight, it helps to understand the relationship between Paul and the people he is writing to.

The Book of Acts records three missionary journeys of Paul. On his second journey, traveling with Silas, Luke, and Timothy, Paul pushed into Europe for the first time — through Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens — before arriving in Corinth, where he stayed for roughly a year and a half. We can date his time there with some precision to around 51–52 AD, because of a reference in Acts 18 to Gallio serving as proconsul of Achaia. This is one of the few fixed chronological anchors we have in Paul’s entire ministry.

Corinth was among the top five cities of the Roman Empire in population — a great commercial hub, a primary center of shipping and trade, and a city with a well-earned reputation for low morality. Think of it as the Las Vegas of the ancient world. It was remarkable, then, that a strong church was planted there. Paul met Aquila and Priscilla, a husband-and-wife ministry team who became important partners in the work, and many Corinthians came to faith.

But Paul eventually left. He returned to Antioch, his home church, and then embarked on a third journey, spending several years in Ephesus. It was likely there that a troubling report reached him about what was happening back in Corinth. The church he had planted was struggling — badly.

Reading through 1 Corinthians, we can piece together what that report contained. There were divisions and quarrels. There were serious cases of immorality. Followers of Jesus were taking each other to court. There were contested questions about marriage, about women in the church, about proper conduct at the Lord’s Supper, about eating food sacrificed to idols, and about the exercise of spiritual gifts. There was elitist snobbery. And there was even an outright denial that Jesus had literally risen from the grave. It was a mess. If it were a school, it would have been placed on probation.

Think for just a moment about how you might respond if you were Paul. *You are all going to hell. You are not worthy to be called a church. You had better get your act together. I am not*

sure you are even really saved. I leave you for a few years and you have fallen into apostasy. Those responses would be understandable. But Paul's response is going to be radically different — and that difference is the heart of everything we study tonight.

A Grace That Saves

“Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes, to the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.” (1 Corinthians 1:1–2)

Paul does not view the church at Corinth through their failures, through their sins, or through the long list of problems that need to be addressed. He views these struggling brothers and sisters through the work of Jesus Christ. *Sanctified.*

That word is the past tense of the word for *holy* — a word that means complete, lacking in nothing, pure, clean, righteous, whole, acceptable to God, used by God, set apart by God for his good purposes. And it is past tense. Completed. This is the gospel: people are made holy by the work of Jesus Christ. Those who call upon him and believe in him receive his righteousness — not as a future promise contingent on good behavior, but as something already done.

Jesus lived the life that we could not live, and he died the death we deserved — a death by which God's wrath and God's justice are poured out upon all that is not of God: sin, iniquity, and depravity. He died the death we deserve so that we might have the life he deserves — a life that is holy and righteous.

Sometimes we take the gospel of God's saving grace and treat it as some theological premise way up in the sky. But notice what Paul is doing here. He is taking the gospel of Jesus Christ — the righteousness of God bestowed upon, gifted to, and created within the believer — as something absolutely and practically true. Not just true in the realm of theology, or as a legal reshuffling of papers in heaven, but true in the sense that something within the believer has fundamentally changed.

Sanctified. Made holy. Past tense. Completed.

Through the living Word of God, Jesus Christ, something new has been created in this creation — and that something is you, sanctified.

This understanding of the changed reality in God's people is the foundation of everything Paul says in this letter. This group of people — sinful, immoral, taking each other to court, fighting

over who is the most important or most spiritual, full of all the ugliness of human sin — Paul sees them through the grace of Christ.

“...to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.” (v. 2)

The word *saints* is the exact same word as *sanctified*. It means holy. Paul is saying to this broken, hurting, confused, and messed-up community: God has done something in you. The grace of God has been poured out upon you — in you God has created something new, something unearned and unworked for. You are sanctified. Now.

And because of what God has done, you have a calling. One of your primary purposes as a follower of Jesus is to give testimony to what God has already done in you. It is a calling toward holiness — *called to be saints*. Your life is a testimony to the power of God in Jesus Christ, and living out that calling is how you give glory to God for his work in you.

Because of God’s completed work in the church at Corinth, Paul can write with full assurance: “*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*” And then, in verse 4:

“*I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus.*”

Paul does not give thanks for their generosity, their service to the poor, their ministries, or their good works. He gives thanks for God’s grace. That is where his eyes are fixed. And it is the lens through which he sees everything else.

A Grace That Empowers

“...that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge — even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you — so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ...”
(vv. 5–7)

One could easily imagine Paul, upon hearing the report about all the trouble in Corinth, thinking: *Wow, see what happens when I am not around. Those people can’t do anything on their own.* But because he sees them through God’s grace, his response is the opposite. He reminds them that they already have everything they need — and frankly, they do not need him.

You were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge. You are not lacking in any gift. Because Paul sees this church through God's grace, he can truly trust the Lord with them — that the Lord has gifted them, that the Lord is among them, that the Lord is working in them. And so one of the recurring themes throughout this letter is Paul reminding the Corinthians: stop looking to me, stop looking to Apollos, stop looking to all those other teachers who tell you that you need them. Look to the Lord, for he has given and continues to give all that you need.

In verse 6, Paul offers a brief piece of evidence for the Lord's work among them: *"...even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you..."* We do not know precisely what he has in mind, but Acts 18:8 gives us a strong candidate:

"Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord, together with his entire household. And many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized."

This is what drove the non-believing Jewish community to bring Paul before the *bema* — the judgment seat of Gallio. Crispus, having believed, was apparently removed from his position and a new ruler of the synagogue installed, and it was this new ruler who organized the opposition. When Gallio dismisses the case and drives them from the tribunal, they turn and beat their own man — because the plan had not worked out:

"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 any of this." (Acts 18:16–17)

This Sosthenes, notably, is the same man Paul names alongside himself in the very opening line of 1 Corinthians — apparently a man who came to faith and became a fellow worker. The confirmation of the gospel's power among the Corinthians was visible and undeniable, and Paul points to it here as evidence that God's empowering grace was real among them.

A Grace That Sustains

"...who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ."
(v. 8)

God's grace does not merely save and empower — it sustains. The Greek word here is *bebaios*, and it carries a rich range of meaning: to sustain, to confirm, to establish, to keep, to make firm and anchored. The word was used in the ancient world in commercial, legal, and even nautical contexts.

God's grace is like an anchor that will hold you in life's storms. It establishes you — in the sense of a foundation upon which a life may be built. It justifies you — in the legal sense of making you right, leaving you guiltless in the day of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And this grace that sanctifies, empowers, and sustains is guaranteed not by your works, but by God's faithfulness:

| “*God is faithful...*” (v. 9)

Not *you are faithful*. If anyone deserved to lose their salvation through their conduct, it was the Corinthians. But Paul grounds their security entirely in God's character, not their performance.

There is a good deal of bad teaching circulating today about God's grace, and the Corinthian correspondence gives us clear answers to several of them. Some say that grace saves you, but then you must earn your keep — that works keep you saved. But 1 Corinthians 1 tells us plainly that not only are we saved by God's grace, we are *kept* by his grace — a grace guaranteed by God's faithfulness, not our own. God is the one who will bring us to completion.

Another teaching, still around today, holds that yes, grace saves you — but that once you are saved and then sin, you lose your salvation. This is contrary to what we are reading here. We are sanctified in Christ, saved by God's grace, and kept in that grace by God's faithfulness. If any group of people in the New Testament deserved to lose their salvation, it was the church of Corinth. Yet Paul gives thanks for God's grace, not their works — because it is grace that empowers and grace that sustains.

And there is a third misunderstanding I hear often: that salvation is essentially a form of life insurance, concerned only with where you go when you die. But look at what Paul says is the purpose of God's faithfulness:

| “*God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*” (v. 9)

The purpose of our salvation is fellowship with the Son, Jesus Christ. This is what it means to be saved — to have fellowship with Jesus, to know and enjoy the living Christ. That is not a destination waiting for us at death. It begins now.

Conclusion

Notice what Paul has done in this opening section of 1 Corinthians. Before he addresses a single problem — and there are many — he establishes a single truth. He reminds the church at Corinth of two things: God's grace, by which they are saved, empowered, and sustained,

guaranteed by God's faithfulness; and their calling — a calling to give testimony, by the lives they live, to what God has already done in them, and a calling to fellowship with Jesus himself.

Paul looked at one of the most dysfunctional churches in the New Testament — a church torn by division, moral failure, arrogance, and confusion — and his first move was not correction. His first move was grace. He saw them not as they were, but as God had made them. Sanctified. Holy. Lacking nothing.

That is not naivety. That is the gospel.

And here is the challenge for us: Can we see ourselves the same way? Not through the lens of our last failure, our lingering struggle, or our awareness of how far we still have to go — but through the lens of what God has already declared true of us in Jesus Christ? And can we see one another that way? The person sitting next to you tonight — whatever you know about their life, their past, their struggles — if they are in Christ, Paul would look at them and say: sanctified. Saint. Lacking nothing that God has not already provided.

This is the foundation upon which Paul will build everything else he has to say to Corinth. Before he addresses a single problem, he establishes a single truth: God's grace has already done something here that cannot be undone. And that grace — the grace that saved you, that empowers you daily, and that will sustain you all the way to the end — rests not on your faithfulness, but on his.

God is faithful.

That is enough.