

Challenges Christians Face

The Thanksgiving of 1 Corinthians

1 Corinthians 1:4-9

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The Thanksgiving of 1 Corinthians

Scripture

Today we continue in our new series of sermons on *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* in a series I am calling *Challenges Christians Face*.

Last week we studied the first three verses of 1 Corinthians. These verses are the salutation of 1 Corinthians, and we looked at the greeters, the greeted, and the greeting.

Paul's letters typically move from the salutation to the thanksgiving (see Romans 1:8; Philippians 1:3-7; Colossians 1:3-8; etc.; Galatians is the exception), before moving on to the body of the letter. He does so again here in 1 Corinthians. So, today I want us to study "The Thanksgiving of 1 Corinthians."

Let's read 1 Corinthians 1:4-9:

⁴ I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵ that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge— ⁶ even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you— ⁷ so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁸ who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (1 Corinthians 1:4–9)

Introduction

When the apostle Paul wrote a letter he generally utilized the following structure: (1) salutation, (2) thanksgiving, (3) body, and (4) conclusion.

What is so fascinating about Paul is that even as he begins his letter he is remarkably theological. His salutation is rich with theo-

logical meaning. And that is no less true of the thanksgiving portion of his letter to the Corinthians.

Commentator Gordon D. Fee says that “Paul’s thanksgivings generally follow the same pattern: I (1) give thanks, (2) to God, (3) always, (4) for the recipients, and (5) for certain reasons, which are then elaborated. . . . As with the salutation, it contains a number of items that anticipate the body of the letter.”¹

Review

Last week we studied the salutation of 1 Corinthians. We noted the greeters, the greeted, and the greeting.

Paul was the primary greeter. Sosthenes was the second greeter, and was most likely Paul’s secretary who actually wrote down what Paul dictated to him.

As I was studying for this week’s message I read some more about the situation that occasioned the letter. You may recall that Paul planted the church during the 18 months in 50-51 AD he spent in Corinth on his second missionary journey. After a few years he heard about problems and divisions in the church.

The traditional understanding of the situation in Corinth is that there was internal division and strife in the church. Paul wrote his letter to correct the division that existed among the various factions. However, I think that commentator Gordon D. Fee is correct in saying that “the historical situation in Corinth was one of conflict between the church and its founder.”²

That is not to say that the Corinthian church was not experiencing internal strife and division; they were. But the primary problem was between the church as a whole and Paul as the church increasingly disagreed with Paul and his teaching. For Paul this presented a twofold crisis—over his authority and his gospel.

¹ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 36.

² Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 6.

Moreover, the key issue between Paul and the Corinthian church had to do with what it meant to be “spiritual.” We will see how Paul addressed that in the body of the letter, but we even begin to see a little of his response in “The Thanksgiving of 1 Corinthians.”

Lesson³

In today’s lesson, I want to examine the thanksgiving of 1 Corinthians. We will notice how Paul thanks God for:

1. The Corinthians’ Past Gifts (1:4-5)
2. The Corinthians’ Present State (1:6-7)
3. The Corinthians’ Future Prospects (1:8-9)

I. Paul Thanks God for the Corinthians’ Past Gifts (1:4-5)

First, Paul thanks God for the Corinthians’ past gifts.

Paul said in verse 4a, **“I give thanks to my God always for you. . . .”**

Paul wrote this letter to the Corinthian church sometime between 53 and 55 AD. That is to say that he wrote this letter about 2 to 4 years after he had left the church in Corinth. However, even though Paul is going to address some very significant and serious matters with them, he begins by thanking God for the Corinthian believers.

Furthermore, it is important to note that Paul does not thank God for what the Corinthians have done for God but rather for what God has done for the Corinthians.

Paul begins by thanking God for the Corinthians’ past gifts.

A. *God Gave the Gift of His Grace to the Corinthians (1:4)*

First, God gave the gift of his grace to the Corinthians.

Paul said in verse 4, “I give thanks to my God always for you

³ I am indebted for the outline of this message to Roy E. Gingrich, *The Book of 1 Corinthians* (Memphis, TN: Riverside Printing, 2000), 8.

because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus.”

The first gift for which Paul gives thanks is **the grace of God**. This is the gift of salvation.

Less than five years earlier all the Christians in Corinth were pagans. They knew nothing of the grace of God. In fact, it is possible that they did not even know about Jesus. They may have been familiar with the Jewish religion, but they had no true understanding of how to come into a right relationship with God.

Then, one day in 50 AD, Paul arrived in the city of Corinth. He stayed in the home of Priscilla and Aquila where the three of them were involved in making and repairing tents and sails. Paul used every opportunity to tell customers, neighbors, visitors, and even strangers about the good news of how a person can come into a right relationship with God. Over the course of eighteen months many of the Corinthian pagans came to have faith alone in Christ alone by **the grace of God** alone.

So, God gave the gift of his grace to the Corinthians.

B. God Gave Two Spiritual Gifts of His Grace to the Corinthians (1:5)

But further, God gave two spiritual gifts of his grace to the Corinthians.

Paul said in verse 5, **“that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge.”**

The two spiritual gifts that Paul mentions are **speech** and **knowledge**. Commentators vary as to exactly what is meant by **speech** and **knowledge**. However, it seems that Paul is simply noting these two spiritual gifts as he will elaborate on them later (in chapters 12-14). There were other spiritual gifts, but these were the two spiritual gifts that seemed to be particularly problematic for the Corinthians.

When Paul mentions **speech** he seems to be referring to the speaking gifts such as tongues, interpretation, prophecy, and so on.

And when he mentions **knowledge** he seems to be referring to the gifts of special knowledge such as wisdom, prophetic revelation, and so on.

One of the issues we will come to see is that the Corinthians believed that they were more spiritual than Paul. God had blessed many pagans in Corinth with his grace. They had become believers. And they discovered, as we shall too, that all true believers not only receive God's grace but they also receive at least one spiritual gift. So, the Corinthians believed that they had arrived at the spiritual pinnacle of the Christian life. But they had misunderstood the purpose of spiritual gifts. They were not given because they had arrived at the pinnacle of the Christian life. They were given to all Christians in order to benefit and bless the church. And so the Corinthians were not *using* the gifts properly; instead, they were *abusing* the gifts.

Nevertheless, Paul is masterfully giving thanks to God for two spiritual gifts of his grace to the Corinthians. The spiritual gifts are, after all, still gifts from God, and for that Paul gives thanks.

II. Paul Thanks God for the Corinthians' Present State (1:6-7)

Second, Paul thanks God for the Corinthians' present state.

There are three reasons why Paul gives thanks for the Corinthians' present state.

A. The Testimony about Christ Was Confirmed Among Them (1:6)

First, the testimony about Christ was confirmed among them.

Paul said in verse 6, **“even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you.”**

When the apostle Paul told them about the person and work of Jesus Christ, many of the Corinthians became believers. Their lives were totally transformed. Their guilt was gone. They had

peace with God and with one another. They experienced the joy of new life in Christ. They discovered, as Paul wrote in his second letter to the Corinthians, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

So, **the testimony about Christ was confirmed among the Corinthian believers as their lives were transformed.**

B. They Are Not Lacking in Any Spiritual Gift (1:7a)

Second, they are not lacking in any spiritual gift.

Paul said in verse 7a, “**so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift.**”

God gave spiritual gifts to the Corinthian church. Later in his letter (in chapter 12) Paul will mention some of the spiritual gifts, such as the utterance of wisdom, the utterance of knowledge, faith, gifts of healing, the working of miracles, prophecy, the ability to distinguish between spirits, various kinds of tongues, and the interpretation of tongues (1 Corinthians 12:8-10). I don’t believe this list is meant to be *exhaustive*; instead, it is *representative* of some of the spiritual gifts that God had given to the Corinthian church.

And even though the Corinthians were abusing the spiritual gifts, Paul nevertheless gave thanks to God for them because they are still gifts from God for the purpose of building up the church.

Furthermore, the presence of the spiritual gifts serves to confirm the gospel. When a person received the grace of God, he or she also received at least one spiritual gift. So, the presence of the spiritual gifts confirms the gospel itself.

But, more than that, it also confirmed Paul’s preaching of the gospel in Corinth. The pagans in Corinth did nothing on their own to make themselves Christians. Instead, as Paul preached the Spirit of God took the Word of God that Paul proclaimed and applied it effectually to the pagans. They became the recipients of the grace of God, and they also became recipients of spiritual gifts.

C. *They Wait for the Revealing of Our Lord Jesus Christ (1:7b)*

And third, they wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul said in verse 7b, **“as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.”**

At first glance, this seems an unusual item for which to give thanks. However, Paul is already beginning to build his argument which he is going to unfurl in the body of his letter.

One of the problems that the Corinthians had is what Gordon D. Fee calls an “overrealized eschatology.”⁴ What does that mean?

The Bible (and our experience) teaches that once we get saved God does not take us immediately to heaven. At the moment of conversion we are instantly justified and pardoned. However, God then leaves us here on earth to mature into the likeness of Jesus. We call that process “sanctification,” and it continues until we die. When we die the Bible teaches us that we are then “glorified.” We go to heaven, we see Jesus face to face, and our struggle with sin is over.

The period in which we are currently living theologians call the “now but not yet” phase. We have *now* started to receive the blessings of our eternal reward, but we do *not yet* have it fully.

What was happening in Corinth is that the believers thought that they had received all that there is to receive. They saw that they had been given all the spiritual gifts, and especially the gift of tongues, which they understood as the “language of angels.”⁵ And so they believed that they had already arrived at the pinnacle of their spiritual experience because they spoke the language of heaven.

So, that is why Paul gives thanks for them as they **wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ**. In a not-so-subtle way he

⁴ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 12.

⁵ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 12.

is telling the Corinthian believers that they have not arrived at the pinnacle of their spiritual experience. In fact, that will only happen when we see **our Lord Jesus Christ**.

III. Paul Thanks God for the Corinthians' Future Prospects (1:8-9)

Finally, Paul thanks God for the Corinthians' future prospects.

He mentions two glorious truths.

A. God Will Sustain Them to the End (1:8)

First, God will sustain them to the end.

Paul said in verse 8, **“who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.”**

This is a marvelous text on the preservation of the saints.

The first question is: who is the one who will sustain us to the end? The nearer antecedent is our Lord Jesus Christ, at the end of verse 7. That is possible. But I believe that the subject is still God. Verses 4 through 8 are one sentence in Greek. And Paul is thanking God for the blessings received. And so it is likely that he still has God in mind as the one who will sustain us to the end.

This is so encouraging for the Christian. When God saves us he doesn't then leave us to struggle on our own. No. The unanimous testimony of God's Word is that when God saves us, he preserves us to the end. And that is exactly what Paul is saying here.

Paul also says that when we get to **the day**, which is the day we stand before God, we will stand **guiltless** before **our Lord Jesus Christ**. Not a single stain of sin will be seen on us. All our sin will be gone! We will be covered by Jesus' perfect righteousness.

What a wonderful encouragement that is! God not only preserves us so that we arrive safely in eternity but when we get there we discover that we are reckoned as guiltless as well!

B. The Faithful God May Be Trusted to Complete His Work in Them (1:9)

And second, the faithful God may be trusted to complete his work in them.

Paul said in verse 9, **“God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”**

Paul wants his readers to understand that **God is faithful**. He doesn't waver. He saved them because he wanted them saved. They stay saved because God does not change his mind about his desire to have a vast number of people in heaven with him for all eternity.

And as pastor John MacArthur says, “If he called us when we were lost and wretched, he surely will not cease to be faithful to that call now that we have come **into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.**”⁶

Conclusion

That is the thanksgiving of 1 Corinthians.

As I close I want to look at both the salutation and the thanksgiving and draw your attention to its Christ-centered focus. Paul refers to Christ 9 times in 9 verses. Notice them with me:

- Paul is an apostle *of Christ Jesus*;
- The Corinthian church is sanctified *in Christ Jesus*;
- Christians universal are those who in every place call upon the name of *our Lord Jesus Christ*;
- Grace and peace from God our Father are effected through *the Lord Jesus Christ*;
- Paul give thanks because of the grace of God that was given *in Christ Jesus*;
- The *testimony about Christ* was confirmed among the Corinthians;

⁶ John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1996), 22.

- The Corinthians wait for the revealing of *our Lord Jesus Christ*;
- The Corinthians will be guiltless in the day of *our Lord Jesus Christ*; and,
- The Corinthians were called into the fellowship of *Jesus Christ our Lord*.

Paul would not have a letter to write if it had not been for Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the most significant person in history. He is the God/man who bridged the gap between God and man.

Are you in a right relationship with God? You can only get into a right relationship with God through his Son, Jesus Christ. He came and lived and died and rose again so that we might have our sins forgiven and have life in him.

Ask God to make Jesus real to you today, if he has never done so. Amen.

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equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAAYER:

O Lord Our God, I thank you for *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians*. Help us to learn a great deal in our study of *Challenges Christians Face*. Help us to learn from these challenges and begin to apply them to our lives on a daily basis.

I thank you for Paul's Christ-centered focus. He constantly points us to the only One who can reconcile us to you. If there is anyone here today who has not yet looked to you for salvation, would you draw that person to yourself in Jesus Christ?

And for this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go and live as those who are called "saints" by God!