

## Historical Context for Corinth and 1 Corinthians

Corinth was a large Greek city which thrived for hundreds of years before Christ. But about 150 years before Christ, it was totally destroyed by the Romans when the Greeks rebelled against Roman rule. For a hundred years it sat in ruins, desolate and uninhabited, until Julius Ceasar ordered it to be resettled as a Roman colony around 44 BC. In the following years, people from Rome and other parts of the empire began to flock there, including a large number of freed slaves.

And it grew quickly into a relatively big city – we don't know the population, but it may have been the third most important in the Roman Empire. This happened mostly because it was positioned on an isthmus. This was a four and a half mile wide strip of land with sea on both sides that connected the southern part of Greece (the Peloponnesian peninsula) to the northern part. This made Corinth a perfect crossroads for trade – land travellers between different parts of Greece had to pass through it and it had harbors on both sides, so it attracted commerce from the sea. Rather than sailing around the southern tip of the peninsula, shipping companies would save a week's time by docking a boat on one side of Corinth, unloading the cargo, carrying it across the city, and then loading it onto another boat to sail on to Italy. (Today they actually have a canal for this.) There was some industry in Corinth – it was known for making bronze – but it was mainly a center for shipping and trade. The other thing that sustained the economy there, was actually tourism. Corinth hosted the Isthmian Games, which were similar to the Olympics. People who travelled to Corinth to see these games needed food and drink, as well as places to stay. In the absence of the modern hotel, people stayed in tents. This is why, incidentally, Paul was able to work successfully as a tentmaker when he was living in Corinth in Acts 18.

All of this combined to make Corinth a city that went very quickly after its reestablishment from being very poor to very rich. Some of its top officials were children of former slaves who had come into money through the booming economy in Corinth. But not everyone benefitted from this. Like many cities which grow quickly with booming economies, many people were left behind or stepped on by the more successful. Corinth became a city with a wide disparity between rich and poor. This contributed as well to Corinth's reputation as a very prideful city. Self-promotion was part of Corinth's culture. If a person gave money to have something built, he also paid to have a big stone chiseled to say, "I \_\_\_\_ built this \_\_\_\_." Because many people had money, they essentially competed to see who could have more public plaques. Lastly, Corinth was known as a city of wild living. It had more than three temples to the Greek goddess Aphrodite, and that certainly influenced their understanding of sexuality. The city's devotion to Aphrodite combined with the large numbers of sailors and travellers passing through led Corinth to become so known for promiscuity that its name became slang. "To play the Corinthian" was another way of talking about sex. Taking together the economic prosperity, the tourism, the pride, and the promiscuous culture, it's easy to see why one commentator called Ephesus, "at once the New York, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas of the ancient world."<sup>1</sup>

Paul arrives in this environment in Acts 18 after he's spent time in Athens. The year is about AD 50. We know this because Acts 18:2 talks about Paul meeting Prisca and Aquilla who had just been exiled from Rome, and that was the year that Claudius exiled the Jews from Rome. Prisca and Aquilla also worked as tentmakers, so Paul went into business with them and they made tents for all of these travellers passing through the city. Acts 18 also says that Paul was trying to persuade both the Jews and Greeks about the Gospel. One person who believed him

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1987) p. 3

was Crispus, who had been a synagogue leader, and whose whole household was baptized. Luke tells the story in Acts 18 and then Paul refers to Crispus in chapter 1. At Corinth, Paul has a vision of Jesus telling him to stay there and that no one will harm him, so Paul ends up staying there for a year and six months. But during that time, the Jews tried to get the Roman government to stop Paul from preaching about Jesus. The proconsul, Gallio, sees the matter as a dispute between Jews and sends them away. Acts then says that another synagogue leader, named Sosthenes, was beaten (presumably by the Romans). We are not positive, but there is a good chance that this Sosthenes later converted and joined the church in Corinth. If so, then it's possible that he's actually the Sosthenes mentioned in in the first verse of the letter. Either way, Paul stays in Corinth until about AD 52, and then he heads on Ephesus and Antioch.

But the story doesn't end there: Some time goes by, during which Prisca and Aquila meet an eloquent preacher named Apollos. He's preaching truth about Jesus, but doesn't understand baptism. Prisca and Aquilla take him aside and explain baptism to him, and eventually send him on his way to continue in ministry. Sometime after this, Apollos arrives in Corinth, and he starts preaching to the church there. During this time, Apollos gathers quite a following among the Corinthians, but he eventually leaves Corinth to rejoin Paul in Ephesus. Paul's has now been away from Corinth for a year or two, and in that time has written letters back and forth with the Corinthians. Most recently, Paul has received a letter from the Corinthians, brought by three men who are mentioned in chapter 16. This letter has somehow revealed about a dozen different problems in the Corinthian church, including the fact that they are divided amongst themselves and many don't really like Paul anymore. Paul's also heard from a woman named Chloe about the divisions in Corinth, and he finds this deeply troubling. Paul sees that the Corinthians are in trouble, but Paul is in Ephesus, and he feels called to stay there because God's doing such exciting things through his ministry. So Paul writes another letter: the one we now call 1 Corinthians.