

Text: 1 Cor. 1:1-9

Title: "The faithful God of an unfaithful Church"

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Place: NBBC

Introduction: Have you ever tried to compose a list of the top five most-sung hymns of our time? There is, of course, no way to know for sure, but my family had a conversation about that once, and the song we sang this morning, "Great Is Thy Faithfulness," was on the list.

The author of the words of that song, Thomas Chisholm, was born in a humble log cabin in Franklin, Kentucky in 1866, and he became a self-trained school teacher without ever having attended high school or college himself. He also worked as a newspaper editor, first in a secular position, and then for the paper of Dr. H. C. Morrison, under whose ministry he came to trust Christ.

Chisholm became a Methodist pastor for a very brief time, resigning to become a life insurance agent because of his poor health. There is not a lot that we would call truly remarkable about Brother Chisholm's life, except for this hymn's wonderful celebration of the faithfulness of his God. Chisholm wrote once of God's day by day faithfulness, "My income has not been large at any time due to impaired health in the earlier years which has followed me on until now. Although I must not fail to record here the unfailing faithfulness of a covenant-keeping God and that He has given me many wonderful displays of His providing care, for which I am filled with astonishing gratefulness."

The apostle Paul may have agreed that "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" belongs on the list of the top 5 hymns. That is the sentiment with which he begins this epistle to the Corinthian church (1:9). As we study through this important New Testament letter, we are going to see that there is often little to

celebrate as truly remarkable about the life of this church. The book tends to move from a problem, to the clarification of a misunderstanding, to the clearing up of confusion, and back to dealing with more problems, but before going to these, Paul begins with the truth, "God is faithful."

There is no shadow of turning with Him, even in a church like the Church of Corinth. He begins in the nine verses before us this morning with a celebration of what I am calling, "The faithful God of an unfaithful church." I want us to organize our thoughts around three points in this regard from the passage.

I. God is faithful, so this letter to the church of Corinth has the author it does (1:1).

Illustration: God has given us all different hats to wear. I have a husband hat, a parent hat, a son hat, a sibling hat, a dad hat that is a little different than a mom hat, a pastor hat, a neighbor hat, and an employee hat. At different times I wear different hats that the Lord has giving to me to wear, depending on the nature of duties at hand.

Application: When we say that because of God's faithfulness this letter has the author that it does, we are referring, of course to the Apostle Paul. He begins each of his letters to the churches in this customary Greek-way of authoring a letter, first noting the author, then the recipients, and then offering a greeting.

Paul's version of this custom, however, is always an expanded one in order to convey important messages of truth. At the beginning of his letters, Paul puts on different hats of his calling before the Lord, which are indicative of the role he believes he must play as the author of this particular letter. In the Thessalonian epistles he is simply the known and appreciated Paul; in Philippians and Romans, he is the more or less

well-known servant of Christ and His gospel; in Philemon he is the prisoner of Christ Jesus; and in the other letters He wrote, he is with some variation of expression what we have here at the beginning of 1 Corinthians, “called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God” (v. 1).

This is very likely the third inspired letter that Paul wrote, the first two being the Thessalonian epistles, so that makes this the first time Paul puts on this particular hat as he writes to a church. He wants to remind this church that he is an apostle of Jesus Christ, and that this fact was not due to his winning an election, but rather to the fact that he had been called to apostleship through the will of God. God is faithful, so this letter has the author it does. Much more could be said about this, of course, but I want to mention only two things in regard to this Corinthian context.

(1) Paul remembered this call of God when confronted with his own unworthiness to be an apostle (1 Cor. 15:9-10). By the grace of God, Paul was what he was. He did not deserve God’s call on his life; it was not fitting that he should have it; but God’s grace gave him what he did not deserve, and Paul’s sense of this motivated him to be the best apostle he could possibly be for his gracious God. We need that same motivation in our calling before the Lord, whatever hat we happen to be wearing at the time, in order to be the best we can be at that calling for the glory of the Lord.

(2) Paul remembered this call of God when confronted with opposition to his authority as a minister of the gospel (1 Cor. 4:1-4; 9:1-2). We cannot get into the nature of this opposition today, but know that there was great courage and fortitude and strength for faithfulness in the words that Paul wrote in the first verse of this letter, “Paul, called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God.” We need that courage and faith in our calling. Faithful is he who calls us who will also

do it. This letter has the author it does, because Paul had the faithful God he did.

Before we leave the first verse, we must take note of the reference to "Sosthenes, the brother." No matter who this Sosthenes may be, that he should be called *brother* by Paul at the beginning of this epistle is a miracle of the grace of the Lord.

We know for sure that he was well-known by the Corinthian church; and we know also that Paul's companion Luke would later tell us of the Sosthenes we learned about two weeks ago in Acts 18, who was the leader of the synagogue that was beaten before Gallio, as their attempt to have Paul persecuted before the Roman consul backfired. We may get to heaven some day and find that this Sosthenes was that Sosthenes. Whomever he was, we will rejoice in the miracle of our faithful God that worked in Sosthenes's life to make him joint-sender of this letter from Paul.

II. God is faithful, so this letter to the church of Corinth has the recipients it does (1:2, 4-9).

Illustration: Had I just moved my family to Corinth and were I looking for a good church to attend, I am not entirely sure that I would have settled on this church. Yet there is an importance sense in which that fact of life is more a condemnation of me than it is of this church.

This church is the recipient of this Pauline epistle, this book of the Bible. This church is part of what we call the apostolic church, the New Testament church, Christianity in its earliest and purest form. Still, it was a church that has serious spiritual problems: divisions (ch. 1), human intellectual pride (ch. 2), carnality (ch. 3), opposition to spiritual authority (ch. 4), sexual immorality (ch. 5), litigation against one another (ch. 6), broken homes (ch. 7), violated consciences of weak brothers (ch. 8), more opposition to spiritual authority (ch. 9), idolatry (ch.

10), out of place women and out of control communion (ch. 11), misuse of spiritual gifts (chs. 12-14), and perhaps worse of all, doubts about the resurrection (ch. 15). In the face of these realities and challenges, Paul tells this church that God is faithful, so this letter has the recipients it does. Notice some things he says about this church.

1. The Corinthian church is the church of God (v. 2). In an ultimate sense, God owned this church and could do with it what he wanted to do with it. We can get confused sometimes about who ultimately owns the local church. It is not man, but God.

One commentator noted the difference of the phrase, “unto the church of God which is at Corinth” with the phrase in the Thessalonian epistles, “unto the church of the Thessalonians in God.” Evidently, the church of Corinth needed a reminder the Thessalonians did not need. True, the local church is our church in one important sense (stewardship vs. ownership), we bear a responsibility for it, but it is God’s church in a much larger sense – he purchased it with His own blood, and so He owns it.

2. The Corinthian church is the at-Corinth part of a much larger entity (v. 2, “which is at Corinth, . . . all that in every [meeting] place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both their [Lord] and ours”). Our local church is one of many who call upon the same Lord as ours.

We can sometimes think that our local church is the only important local church. A kind of provincialism can develop in our attitude about our own church that causes us to undervalue the importance of other congregations of like-minded precious faith. This is especially true in a context like Corinth, in which their unique excesses caused them to create a church experience in their own image, one with many characteristics

not seen elsewhere in the New Testament. Our fellowship with sister churches must be precious to us.

3. The Corinthian church is sanctified in Christ Jesus and called (named) *saints* (i.e., *holy ones*; v. 2).

Illustration: In the Old Testament, God sanctified a people just like he sanctified a tent to be the tabernacle (Exod. 19:1-6). That was the day that Israel was made a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

It turns out that the Greek translation of the Old Testament uses the Greek word for *church* scores of times to refer to this nation (*ekklesia*; Deut. 4:10). When Paul called the New Testament local church of Corinth those who are sanctified by Jesus Christ and called *saints*, he was saying that they have been set apart the way Israel and Israel's tent were.

Application: Things set apart and made holy in this way were to be used exclusively for God's intended purposes. You were not allowed to go camping in the tent that had been sanctified by God for the worship of His people. Similarly, God's people were not to live their lives for just any purpose, but for God's purposes. Look how Paul goes on to describe the sanctified saints of God:

1. They are the undeserving recipients of God's free gift of grace (v. 4). No one who is a part of a New Testament local church is there because he deserves to be there. We are here because we have received the free gift of God's grace, which we did not deserve and could never have earned. It is a great gift and privilege to be here as God's church today.

2. They are enriched in word and knowledge (vv. 5-6). Corinth was a very wealthy city, but here Paul speaks of true riches. This is a special reference to two categories of specific spiritual gifts with which the church was blessed. Paul says that the

local church had been made rich with the ability to express truth, the way Apollos was gifted. And they had been made rich with the ability to know truth, the way Paul was gifted.

Paul will later have to say that these riches are of little use without love (ch. 13), but here he expresses thankfulness for the gifts to communicate God's truth and to understand God's truth, which made this church truly rich with treasures that last when used correctly. Those riches were a confirmation of the truth of the testimony of Christ's saving cross-work (v. 6), and they were sure proof that these were a people who would not perish (vv. 8, 18).

3. They are those who would continue to be fully prepared for the coming day of the Lord (vv. 7-9; Phil. 1:8-9). God's faithful plan could not be derailed by the unfaithfulness of this church. The work of sanctification in Christ Jesus is an eternally settled work, all because God is faithful. Because He is faithful, this letter has the recipients it has – the church of God, a local body with the same Lord as many other local bodies, sanctified by Christ Jesus and called *saints* – graced, enriched, and prepared all by the work of our faithful God.

III. God is faithful, so this letter to the church of Corinth has the greeting it does (v. 3).

Application: Customarily, the Greek letter would simply have the word meaning *rejoice* or *greeting*. Paul substitutes *grace* and *peace* in his letters. *Grace* is the word that sums up why we have what we have in Christ, and *peace* is the word that sums up what we have in Christ. We have no peace without grace, and we have no grace without our Savior and God, Jesus Christ.

The grammar of v. 3 in the original does not repeat the prepositional phrase or the article when it tells us where grace and peace come from. They come from God, who is the Father and

the Lord Jesus Christ. There is no peace without grace, and there is no grace without Jesus Christ. In these 9 verses, He is mentioned 9 times. He is at the center of the covenantal love of our faithful God.

Conclusion: That third verse of Great is Thy Faithfulness puts sums up our common identity with the Corinthian church well:

“Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth,
Thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide,
Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow,
Blessings all mine with ten thousand beside.”

We are often an unfaithful church like the unfaithful church of Corinth, but like them we too have a God of great faithfulness. May we truly marvel over the faithfulness of our God in the face of our unfaithfulness to Him. And may we humbly seek to be more like Him through grace and for peace.

“A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction—the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

Preachers and Preaching