

**1 Corinthians 1:1-9**  
**(Jeremiah 1:4-9; Matthew 28:18-20)**  
**“Called, Gifted and Kept Secure”**

**Introduction**

This morning we begin the study of one of my favorite books of the Bible, a letter written by the apostle Paul to the church in Corinth, Greece. By the mid-first century, Corinth was one of the leading cities of the Roman Empire, and it is remarkable how much it was like the great global cities of our day, known for multiculturalism, paganism and hedonism. The Romans even coined an expression, “to corinthianize,” as a description of sexual immorality.

It is also sadly remarkable, but not surprising, how much the church in Corinth was like the church in our day, more affected by the world for ill than affecting the world for good, struggling with division, marked too often by a strange brew of super-spirituality and coarse sensuality. Add to that the fact that the church in Corinth clearly was going through a strained relationship with Paul, her founding apostle. It is clear, also, how deeply Paul cared for the people of Corinth. So he writes to reestablish his apostolic leadership for the sake of the gospel of Christ.

The letter is framed between Paul’s powerful presentations of the cross of Christ in chapter one, and the resurrection of Christ in chapter fifteen. Between the two, Paul addresses many of the kinds of problems faced in every place and time God’s people as we seek to apply the gospel to the challenges of daily living. The particular issues he addresses have come to him through at least two sources that he mentions in the letter: in the first half of the letter, he speaks of things reported to him by “Chloe’s people” (1:11), and in the second half, he turns to address specific questions asked of him in a letter he had received from the Corinthian church (7:1).

Most remarkable to me is that, in spite of all the trouble this church has caused Paul, he opens this letter with an expression of deep affection and genuine gratitude for them. While he reminds them in the opening verse that his apostleship is not merely a human matter, but that he has been “called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus,” he moves on immediately to remind the Corinthians that they, too, have been called of God, gifted by God and that, as they follow faithfully, they will be kept safe to the end by God’s grace.

What Paul reminds them is what we always should remind one another, for the calling, gifting and keeping of God’s people are as true of us today as of the original readers of Paul’s letter. If you are a Christian, I hope that this will encourage you this morning. If you are not yet a Christian, I hope that this will whet your appetite for the feast Christ offers, if only you will believe and follow him.

## Body

### 1. God has called you (1:2,3,9).

The question of calling, vocation, is at the heart of our quest for meaning: Why am I here? How should I spend my days? What will be my legacy? What does it mean to live a good life? Paul orients all such questions to the only one who can give them ultimate meaning. He begins the letter by referring, not only to his calling as an apostle, but to the calling of every Christian. He emphasizes two aspects of our vocation as God's people.

*God has called you to be like him.*

Both the word translated "sanctified" and the word translated "saints" describe one who has been set apart by God for his purposes, as one through whom he will display his character and accomplish his will. And so both carry the idea of "holiness" – not at all in the sense of describing someone who is most unattractively religious – but rather as describing someone who is increasingly like Jesus, one marked by self-sacrificial love and compassion, one who loves and serves the Lord and others, especially those whom no one else seems to love. How can this be? How can a person who is by nature self-centered become self-forgetful?

*God has called you to be with him.*

It is through union with Christ: "sanctified in Christ Jesus" (1:2). Our salvation flows from this. The first Christians had a view of such intimate union with Christ that many of the theological problems and arguments that mark Christians today would not have occurred to them or have carried any weight, because we are made one with one another through our union with Christ. When one grasps this and begins to experience its reality, God is no longer a distant figure to be feared, but one who has drawn us into intimate communion with him and into fellowship with one another, and the Christian life becomes an organic thing rather than a mere list of things to be believed and done.

### 2. God has gifted you (1:4-7).

Again, the question arises how anyone with our limitations could possibly accomplish God's purposes and display his character. We read of Paul's life, his courage and complete focus on, in his own words, running the race before him, and we ask ourselves how we could ever follow in such steps. But Paul reminds us that the source of his wisdom and strength is also the source of our wisdom and strength. His words, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (1:3), are not merely a rhetorical flourish, but a succinct summary of the gospel in all its glory. It is a reminder that our

salvation is God's gift to us and that it reconciles us to God and to one another, and grants us all that is needed for life and salvation. Two aspects of this gift are emphasized in these verses.

*God has given you all you need to face the past and the present with confidence.*

We need no longer seek to relive and re-litigate the past. We can let it go and move on, because Christ has dealt with our sin and brokenness, and calls us to forgive others as God has forgiven us. We can face the present assured of his calling and that he has provided everything we need in order to do what he wants us to do. So, Paul writes,

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, 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 (1:4-7a).

These gifts of grace were, as we will see in our study of this letter, the occasion of so much division, because they had become for some a source of deep and corrosive spiritual pride. Nevertheless, Paul makes clear that the gifts themselves are good and to be celebrated rather than regretted or despised. The problem was not with the gifts, but with the attitude of some toward the gifts and with the misuse of the gifts by others.

The key is this: If you are God's child, he has called you into intimate fellowship with him and given you everything you need to do everything he calls you to do, so you need never be afraid. You should face each day with confidence and anticipation of what the Lord will use that day to mold you and shape you and conform you more deeply to the image of his Son, and how in the process he will use you as an instrument of his love and grace in the lives of others.

*God has given you all you need to face the future with hope.*

But Paul is sure to remind the Corinthians that, in spite of all that they have been given, they have not yet arrived. They are still on a journey to God's city, and Christ who is their life has not yet been fully revealed in his glory. Some of the super-charismatics at Corinth thought that they already had everything there was to have and were already living in the age to come. So Paul reminds them that the best is yet to be with these words: "so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1:7).

We live in the presence of the future, and are to live in its light. We have already been given much of the age to come and have tasted its blessings. But

that future has not yet fully come. So theologians of the New Testament often speak of our life in Christ as marked by “the already and the not yet.”

### **3. God will keep you (1:8-9).**

If the end has not yet come, what happens if, between now and then, I fail and am cast away as being unable to endure and therefore unworthy of the prize? Paul concludes this passage with words of encouragement and comfort meant to bring us hope and proper confidence. He writes,

so that you are not lacking any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord (1:7-9).

*God will keep you strong to the end.*

If we have any self-understanding, even the strongest among us know that they are capable of falling away from truth and into sin. If you don't know this, you are in danger. Paul makes this warning explicit later in this letter: “Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall” (10:12). But, if that is true, how can we face the future unafraid? Because of God's promise to keep us strong to the end: “... our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end ... [and again] God is faithful” (1:8-9). This is not a call to carelessness. It is rather the assurance that, as we seek his strength, he provides it, and as we follow Christ, he does not withhold his hand and leave us to our own devices.

*God will keep you blameless on the day of his appearing.*

And we need not be obsessed with failure and focused on the past. Christ will not only sustain us to the end, but will keep us “guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1:8). If you are in Christ, then he has exchanged his life for yours, and truly, as Paul wrote in his second letter to the Corinthian church, “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).

## **Conclusion**

Never forget that all this is God's gracious gift to us. Our hope is simply this: “God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (1:9). So why should we fear, whatever may come? And why would we live for nothing, when the one eternal and true God, the source of life and of salvation, has called us to his heart, has made us his beloved children, and gifted us to live and love and serve the one who gave himself for us?