

"The Faithfulness of God"
I Corinthians 1:1-9
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Bill is the kind of guy that when you meet him you like him. He's thirty-eight, married, has two kids and a mortgage. He's in his second job since graduating from college. It's an o.k. job - He makes a living. But he would admit, he's not quite setting his professional world on fire - I mean some of the dreams he had when younger are not and probably will not be realized.

Bill's been married 13 years and that's o.k. too. But again he would admit, years earlier, he thought the relationship would be a lot sharper, a lot more stimulating and that he and his wife would have one of those marriages where, well things wouldn't just be "average".

Bill became a Christian when he was 13. He was reared in a good home and remembers that when he was in 8th grade, he understood as never before that he needed to be forgiven for his sins. He trusted Jesus to do that because he believed Jesus died for him.

Christianity became, for Bill, a way of life. Through his high school and college years, he read his Bible, participated in church activities, and thought great thoughts about his relationship to God and the world around him. He looked forward to what was ahead for him - confident that he and God would do great things. Oh, there were some real weaknesses in his character, some habits that he still indulged - but he was certain that it was only a matter of time before he would outgrow those sins.

Well, a lot has happened in those 25 years since Bill became a Christian and in just this last year He's begun to take inventory of his life. The reality of his life isn't quite as shiny as the dreams were. As he said, his marriage is o.k. and his job is o.k. but not quite what he'd expected - even if he never was able to articulate what he'd expected. Oh, it's not that he expected a perfect life but what he didn't expect was how imperfect it would be. And really discouraging is how imperfect he is. Bill can't remember how many times he's promised God things would be different. Do you know those old habits he thought he'd outgrow. They didn't drop off like he thought - he's still fighting some of them. The truth is there are days when it appears that his attitudes and relationships and priorities are no different than some around him who don't even know the Lord.

One of the frightening things for Bill is that he's not even certain he cares as much any more. He still attends church regularly but frankly he's stopped expecting God to change anything in his life. Oh, he still hears sermons and testimonies about radically changed lives but Bill has actually gotten to the place where he's a bit cynical about that- "Just wait", he thinks to himself, "just wait until you've been a Christian as long as I have." Bill has settled down into a status quo that is only interrupted from time to time with even darker thoughts: Is any of it true? Am I even a Christian?

When he looks at his own very imperfect self, in the midst of an imperfect world, and looks at what appears to be very little change in his conduct and attitudes - he gets truly discouraged. Some days he thinks the reason he doesn't give up on the whole thing is that it just isn't convenient. It's easier to just ride along - but he doesn't know where he's going.

Have you ever been discouraged about your Christianity? I mean, have you ever despaired of becoming what you think a Christian ought to be? And have you just dropped into maintaining the status quo? If that describes you at all, then I suspect that like Bill, the last thing you want to hear again is how you ought to change.

When the preacher says you ought to read your Bible more, you ought to stop this or that particular sins, you ought to share your faith with your neighbors, you ought to teach a Sunday School class or help the underprivileged, something inside of you says, "I've heard that before, I've tried that before, and it just didn't work. I don't want to hear it anymore.

That's not necessarily rebellion, that's discouragement. Don't misunderstand, I'm not saying we are not responsible for the discouragement. We're not victims. But what I am asking is how do we get out of that condition? Is it just a matter of grabbing our own bootstraps and pulling ourselves up? I don't think so. We've tried that. I think Bill and anyone who identifies with him need a different perspective. They are discouraged - lacking courage.

I Corinthians is a letter from the Apostle Paul to a group of people in the city of Corinth, Greece. These are Christian people to whom he's writing. In this letter, Paul is about to chastise them severely for a number of practices in their lives that are outright sinful, unholy, contrary to the character and will of God.

1:11 there are quarrels among you.

You are dividing into factions and breaking fellowship with one another.

5:1-2 A man in your church is sleeping with his father's wife and you are proud. You aren't embarrassed even by flagrant open sin in your midst.

6: You are so self-centered that you are taking each other into pagan courts to get your "rights".

6: And some of your members are involved in illicit sexual affairs.

7: and some of you are divorcing your spouses wrongfully.

8-14: you are exercising your Christian liberty to the point that you are hurting others,

you are coming together to worship but it isn't worship - it's a disorderly travesty.

That's quite a list Paul has! And he has some strong words for these people - to stop their sin.

But look at the first 9 verses of chapter 1: Paul doesn't directly address those issues - why not? Why doesn't Paul just start his letter by "getting in their faces" about their sin? I think the reason is this: For those Corinthians Christians to even desire to obey they need perspective. Paul could have said to them, to Bill or to anyone of us - you just need to change the way you're living - get right with God - shape up! But without the proper perspective that is just a new form of legalism - Leaving the impression that you just need to get hold of yourself and make it happen and then God will be happy with you and you'll feel better. But obligation and even fear can only motivate a person so long.

No, Paul does not just "get in their faces" about their sin, he gives them a foundation and a motivation for change - he gives them perspective. To those like Bill in this congregation, God comes first not with a "you ought to" but with a message of tremendous encouragement. Look at verse 1: "Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God..."

I probably don't have to remind most of you that these words from Paul are authoritative - that means he speaks for God. As Peter reminds us, "No prophecy of scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." (2 Peter 1:20-21) Though those words are specifically referring to the Old Testament we know from the rest of Scripture they apply equally to the words of the New Testament apostles. The Spirit of God guided Paul's thinking in such a way as to guarantee that what God wanted written to the Corinthians and hence to us, Paul would write.

And as Christ's Apostle, Christ's messenger, and called to that position by God's plan, the design and outworking of every detail of his life, this is what Paul now authoritatively says to them and to us.

- I. AFFIRMATION of our past (experience)
- II. CONFIRMATION of our present and
- III. PROCLAMATION of our future.

1. First of all let's look at this AFFIRMATION OF PAST. I ask you, "Did you call upon the name of the Lord Jesus?" Was there a time in your life when you realized your need for the Savior? When you realized that you were a sinner? When you realized that apart from his death, paying the penalty for your sin, you would be punished for eternity for them? When you understood there was no other way to be forgiven than by Jesus? When you called out to Him, to save you from the guilt and penalty of your sin, to forgive you and be your Savior?

Calling on the "name of our Lord Jesus Christ" means more than just intellectually understanding and verbally saying His name; to call on the name of the Lord is to, from the heart, accept all He is and all He has done for you - it is a statement of giving up, of yielding to Him, of trusting Him, of humbly coming to Him, of fully acknowledging who He is and placing your life and your future in His hands.

Some of you this morning would have to admit that it isn't just that you haven't said those words, the truth is, regardless of the exact words, you've never cried out from your heart, to Jesus, to save you. If you know you need the Savior today, if you know you need to become a real Christian - then please right now where you sit, in your own heart and from your heart call out to Him to save you.

But others of you here can rightly say, "Yes, I have called on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ." Then I ask, "How did that come about?" "How is it that you understood who Jesus is and came to place your faith in Him?" Well, you say, I just woke up to the truth one day!

Yes, but how did that come about? Paul writes, "To the church of God." That word "Church" is defined as "individuals called out by summons to assemble." The "church" is the assembly of the "called out, the summoned ones." God called you, God summoned you. He providentially guided every detail of your life to bring you to that understanding and place where you called out to Jesus.

Have you trusted in Jesus? Then let me tell you it is because God has worked in your life! God AFFIRMS that you belong to His church - His people. That is an amazing truth, to me - I belong to God - He called me, acquired me, owns me, I'm His - God's.

Look at what else he AFFIRMS ABOUT OUR PAST; in verse 2 he writes: We are "sanctified in Christ Jesus." "Sanctified" means "set apart as holy." In the Old Testament it says that God took certain people and even certain utensils (spoons, candlesticks and tongs) and had them washed and set apart from the common utensils to be used only for his special purposes - they were sanctified. Those utensils were set apart for special use.

In one sense, God has taken us out of, has liberated us from our former way of life and has put us into relationship with Himself - the Holy God. Because God, based on Christ's death, has forgiven our sin, He can rightly declare us "not guilty." Because of our new relationship to Jesus, we have a new status conferred upon us - we are holy. It is not that God is blind to our continuing sin. It is that he has conferred this status of holiness upon us and now calls on us, with enabling grace, to live out who we are. **We don't become holy by acting in holy ways - We are holy, by God's choice and action, and we act out our holiness by obedience.**

We've lost perspective when we Christians, think our sins condemn us to an unholy, second-class status as Christians or worse yet, remove us from the church of God. If you have called upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ - you belong to God. You are holy in his eyes - forgiven, guiltless, called to live out who you are by his grace. God affirms our past, he declares what is already true of us.

2. Not only does God affirm our past but he CONFIRMS OUR

PRESENT. To "confirm" means to substantiate - to establish as true what may have been doubtful. By the time Paul gets through admonishing the Corinthians for their sin, and the Holy Spirit of God convicts them of it, they may well be like some of us who can't see the work of God in our lives because we are so focused on our failings. God the Holy Spirit does not convict us of sin to defeat us, to drive us away, to discourage us BUT to draw us to grace for forgiveness.

Paul writes to the Corinthians that he can see clearly how God has changed them already. Remember this is written to a group of people who are engaged in some very ungodly, unseemly behavior. And yet this is what he writes: "I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way—in all your speaking and in all your knowledge— because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you. Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed." (1 Peter 1:4-7)

As the rest of the book demonstrates, there were many things yet to be changed in the lives of these Christians - BUT Paul would never allow them to forget what God had already done. We may be so overcome with our sin, our failings, our hopelessly slow attempts at growing in Christlikeness that, in discouragement, we lose sight of what God has already done and is continuing to do in our lives. In verse 4, Paul speaks of the "grace given them", and in verse 5, of how they "have been enriched in every way", and verse 7, of how they "do not lack any spiritual gift." The point is in verse 6, Paul sees a great deal of evidence that his "testimony about Christ" was confirmed in them; they became the real thing.

How about you? Even if your spiritual life seems in shambles right now - why are you here this morning? Because of God's grace! Why aren't you "chucking" the whole thing? Because God won't let you go! Why do you still care about your relationship to God? Because the Spirit of God is still wooing you! Oh, maybe in some ways you have blown it royally, over and over again. But look at what he's done in your life. What would your life be like today if God had not saved you? When I sit down with you in your discouragement, as I have done with many of you, I see what God has done in you. I marvel at his grace.

I was with a group of men on Lake Powell (Arizona/Utah) for three days last month. A group of men. I know at least some of the men well enough, as I know myself well enough, to say we are far, far from perfect. In fact we could be easily discouraged by the slow and sometimes seemingly no progress in spiritual things. But what a privilege it

was to be with a group of men in whom God has worked. These are men who care about their relationship to Him. Men who strive to be obedient to His Word. Men who care about their language, their morality, their ethics, their families, and their God.

Paul writes to the Corinthians and to us to CONFIRM God's work in our lives in the present.

Lastly, Paul writes A PROCLAMATION OF OUR FUTURE. Here is what God proclaims: "He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful. (1 Corinthians 1:8-9)

Remember again to whom Paul writes that? A church in Corinth that was rife with problems. A people who are failing in some very significant ways. Individuals who have a long way to go to Christlikeness. And he writes it to us. And the proclamation is that God will keep you strong to the end - to the time of Christ's return.

Is the Christian life too hard? Are the sins in your life so many and so deeply rooted that you are convinced that nothing will ever truly change? Are there times when you wonder if you are a Christian at all and if you know you are, do you wonder if you will just finally slip away from it all?

The words "keep you strong" translate the same root word that is translated "confirmed" in verse 6. God will confirm you to the end. That words "confirmed" or "keep you strong" speak of a result that is guaranteed because of the basis of the guarantee. God's proclamation is that we who have called upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we who belong to His church, we who are truly Christians will continue in our faith to the end. How can God say that? Doesn't He see my weaknesses, my sinfulness, my discouragement, my temptation to just give up? But the basis of his proclamation is not you or me, the basis is Him. He will keep us strong the end. He who began a good work in us will carry it on to completion. God is the one who called. God is the one who brought us into relationship with his Son. God is the one who forgave us and says we will never stand before him as guilty - because Jesus has taken our guilt away. So no one can justly accuse or condemn us. God is the one who is faithful, who will not fail.

God has AFFIRMED, declared to be true, that we who have called upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ belong to Him.

God has CONFIRMED, substantiated, that he has done a work in our lives.

God has PROCLAIMED, that He, God, will keep us, not let us go, keep working in us, and will finally present us to Himself as trophies of grace.

We look at how far we have to go and we despair. God looks at how far we have come and at His power to complete the process - and He proclaims, "He is faithful to keep us strong to the end."

Now when the Corinthians, or Bill, of whom I spoke earlier, or we get this perspective on our past, our present and our future what is the proper response? I think it is gratitude and fortitude - Thankfulness and courage. So thankful to God for what He has done and so encouraged to press on because God won't fail in doing what he has planned in and for me. And with new encouragement we can hear his correction, we can take his discipline, we can respond to his instruction - we can hear the rest of I Corinthians and know it is not a threat but a call to the holiness that God wills to work in us - and He will do so - He is faithful. Take heart, dare to believe again that life can be different, not because you are able but because your God is and you belong to Him.