

WHY 1-2 CORINTHIANS?

We move to the New Testament for the first time in the month of February. We are not beginning with a Gospel, but we will read through Mark this summer as part of a plan (while we take a break from preaching through John). Here are several reasons we picked 1-2 Corinthians.

The themes of the book are relevant in our day. The theme of 1 Corinthians is Paul urging a struggling church to live in light of the gospel, not pursue worldliness like those around them, and to pursue unity in the church based on their common faith and mission. The theme of 2 Corinthians is Paul defending his ministry to a particular church amidst false accusations, while also helping them understand the relationship between the gospel and suffering. In these books we find Christians battling worldliness, questions of how to suffer well, and what it looks like to pursue unity amidst disagreement. These are all relevant to our lives as Christians—and we would therefore do well to see how Paul addresses each one.

The books help us frame all of life in light of the cross and resurrection. Paul begins 1 Corinthians by noting how even as the cross is foolishness to the world, it is everything for us who are in Christ (1:18-25); so much so that he resolves to focus his ministry on nothing else than Christ and him crucified (2:2). Towards the end of 1 Corinthians, Paul says what is of “first importance” for us is that Christ has died and risen from the dead (15:1-3), which then leads into an in-depth explanation on how Christ’s resurrection gives us hope for future resurrection with him. 2 Corinthians is no less full of wonderful statements of the gospel. As we read these books, notice how 1) the gospel often is looked to for grounding and purpose in this life, and 2) the gospel is the reason we have hope for the future. In other words, all of life (past, current, and future) is framed by the cross and resurrection of Jesus.

The books present a manifesto of Paul’s purpose in ministry. Part of this has to do with the anger of the Corinthians as Paul confronts their sin in 1 Corinthians, and the hesitancy of the Corinthians as Paul defends his ministry despite his suffering in 2 Corinthians. However, thankfully for us, this difficult situation with a particular church for Paul allows him to clarify the purpose of his ministry such that we learn what is most important for him, and think through what it looks like for us to minister to people on behalf of God.

The books make sure we understand that our salvation should influence our living. The tension of 1-2 Corinthians could be well described by the bridge between 1 Corinthians 2-3. Paul closes 1 Corinthians 2:16 by saying, “But we have the mind of Christ.” And yet he begins 1 Corinthians 3 by saying that he cannot address them as spiritual people, but as infants in Christ because they are still living out the flesh (1 Corinthians 3:1-3). What does this show us? The Corinthian church may know the truths of the gospel—but they are failing to live them out by living differently.

Through Paul's instruction we are reminded of the need to live differently in light of the salvation that God has brought us—and given many examples of what that should look like.

The books give teaching on practical matters. The Lord's Supper/Communion. Marriage and divorce. Church discipline. Spiritual gifts. Giving. By nature of his rebuke to this erring church, Paul gives instruction on what we should be thinking or doing on several important and practical matters of the faith. That isn't to say that there is universal agreement on what he is saying! However, it is a good reminder that we want to bring our views of these matters—as controversial as they may or not be—ultimately in service to God and his word.

Conclusion. Our main takeaway from 1-2 Corinthians should be some combination of several of these points. That we would be more convinced that the death and resurrection of Jesus is the most important thing we believe, and the most important influencer of our lives—such that we live differently (holy lives in service to God) and believe differently (what God says to be true of these matters of practice). As you read, you may be amazed at how much of a train wreck the Corinthian church seems to be. Let us be warned: this is what a church becomes if it does not 1) apply the gospel to all of life, and 2) intentionally seek to be different than the culture of the day. But also let us be encouraged: God has done a work of new creation in us through Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17) such that we can now follow him as we wait for final victory from sin in the life to come (1 Corinthians 15:56-58).