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Isaiah 49:1-7 | Psalm 80:1-8, 18-20 | 1 Corinthians 1:1-9 | Mark 13:24-37

1 CORINTHIANS 1:3-9

³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴ I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵ for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind — ⁶ just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you — ⁷ so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁸ He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

INTRODUCTION

He got his first job as a church organist at the age of 18. Having been orphaned at age 10 and living with his oldest brother, Johann Christoph, Johann Sebastian Bach spent much of his childhood developing his musical talent. After that first appointment, at Weimar, he spent the next 47 years playing and composing throughout Germany, primarily in churches. There's a story about one of Bach's early posts at a small Lutheran congregation. People started to complain about his music—music he felt was some of the best he'd composed to that point. They felt it was too ostentatious, too flashy. Some thought it was so much so as to be sinful.¹

But this was at odds with Bach's own understanding of what he was doing—his philosophy, or really theology, of music. He once said: "All music should have no other end and aim than the glory of God and the soul's refreshment; where this is not remembered there is no real music but only a devilish hubbub."² He's likewise famous for completing his composition manuscripts by inscribing three little letters at the bottom: SDG, meaning *Soli Deo Gloria*, "to the glory of God alone." For Bach, his musical talent was nothing if not directed to the glory of God.

Talent and God. This is our topic this morning as we consider that reading from Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church. It's an interesting opportunity I have to address this passage again, having addressed it this past January. And while it has been only 11 months, I think we can all agree it *feels* like it was at least five years ago. But as I studied the passages this week, it seemed to me the message of this one is still relevant today, perhaps especially so. As Paul writes to the Corinthians, he writes to a church that is struggling. They have a lot of gifts and resources, and yet somehow things just aren't going their way. They seem to have forgotten who it is that sustains them, and so devolved into a mess. And here's the argument of the passage—what the Corinthians needed, and what all Christians need—is to be reminded that it is God who is faithful and who strengthens us to the end. For now, let's take a closer look to see how this argument unfolds. To do this, we need answer two major questions.

¹ "J. S. Bach: Soli Deo Gloria - To the Glory of God Alone," Christianity.com. Originally published July 19, 2010. christianity.com/church/church-history/church-history-for-kids/j-s-bach-soli-deo-gloria-to-the-glory-of-god-alone-11635057.html

² Timothy W. Bowes, *Light Steps* (Maitland, Florida: Xulon Press, 2007), 131.

1. WHO ARE THEY?

First, who is it that Paul is addressing? Of course, it is the Corinthian church. But what are they like? To what kind of people is he writing? And to answer this, we need to see the complexity—the incoherence even—of Paul’s addresses—both sides of the coin. On the one hand, he can call them sanctified saints, as he does in the verses just before our passage—or brothers (and sisters) as he does in the verse following.³ But we must remember, Paul actually knows this dumpster fire of a church. He founded this church. He lived with them for a year and a half.⁴ In fact, we can see later in this letter that he’s already written them at least once since.⁵ We learn in the two verses following our passage that he’s getting upsetting reports about them from Chloe’s people.⁶ In two short chapters, he will call them spiritual infants. That is, he’ll stop addressing them as a church, and start addressing them as Kids’ Church because they behave like children. It’s a strange and complex set of addresses. He loves them as family, but offers a harsh rebuke as only family can.

Interestingly, we get another major clue as to what this church is like here in our passage. Paul notes that they are a fully resourced church. Paul gives thanks to God for giving the Corinthian church, we learn down in verse 7, *every gift*. They are a gifted church. Indeed, he specifically mentions two gifts that will appear in a list of such gifts in chapter 12: speech and knowledge. They have been enriched in speech and knowledge—two very useful gifts in a pseudo-gnostic Greek philosophy-oriented cosmopolitan culture like Corinth. They have all the knowledge they need and the rhetorical skills to be impressive. And yet, there is still that other side of the coin. How do they use these gifts? We learn, in chapters 6, 11, and 13, that they use them to abuse each other. They have gifts, but lack the very thing needed to use them well: a spiritual maturity characterized by love. They don’t use their resources self-sacrificially, but for their own advantage. And Paul will get to that later. But here, it is a compliment waiting for a critique.

So, who are they? They are sanctified, yet they act like children. They are gifted, yet use their gifts to abuse each other. It’s a mess of a church, full of talent and resources, but also hypocrites and broken people.

It’s not unlike all churches, including Christ Church. We have some of the greatest people in the world. We have talent. We have some resources. There is no doubt, none at all, that God has richly blessed this church and the people in it. But of course, as Paul indicates here in the opening of this letter, that was also true of the Corinthian church. And yet they failed to grow spiritually. They factionalized. They took their many gifts and held each other hostage with them. And we have to be realistic. We can have those tendencies also. So, let it be a solemn warning to us. Are we in danger of using our gifts to serve our own agendas rather than each other? Are we in danger of losing sight of the spiritual work of the church in favor of expressing our talents? Are we dulling the glory of God by focusing attention on ourselves? These are questions worthy of consideration.

³ 1 Cor 1:1-2, 10.

⁴ Acts 18:1-17.

⁵ 1 Cor 5:9.

⁶ 1 Cor 1:11.

2. WHY HAS IT GONE SO WRONG?

But it also leads us to our second major question. Why has it gone so wrong? If they are so talented, why are they in such a bad state? The answer becomes clear: They are missing something. It's there in the last two verses: *"He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord."* The foundational truth of the church—which they seem to have forgotten—is that it is God who strengthens them to the end. It is his faithfulness, and not their talents or resources, that called them into fellowship with Christ and will sustain them as they wait for Christ's Second Advent.

But you see, the Corinthian mistake is so easy to make. When you have resources—or become overly concerned with resources and gifts and talent, you begin to think that's all that matters. The Corinthians did. They got hyper-focused on their giftedness and let spiritual maturity pass them by. But it's more than that. It's that they then relied on those things for their worth, their identity, their perceived value in the world. They began to rely on what they thought they bring to the table to find their strength, to sustain them. Despite knowing the stinging rebukes that fill the rest of this letter, Paul reminds them here that God is faithful—even to the hypocrites and broken—and God will strengthen his children to the end. Christ's sacrifice on the cross, his willingly taking the punishment for our sin, is what we need to remember—not talent and strength, but selfless-sacrifice that brings salvation. It is the only thing that can sustain us.

Let us not lose sight of this, brothers and sisters. It's so easy to get caught up in giftedness. God gives many talents and each are needed. But *his* strength, his calling us into fellowship with Christ Jesus, is even more needed. We should be asking the question of whether we are growing up spiritually? Are we growing in our Christian virtues? Are we growing in love for one another and in mercy for the world around us? Are we becoming more Christ-like in our attitudes and lives? Are we relying fully, and only, on God's strength? In short, are we remembering that it is God who is faithful and who strengthens us to the end?

CONCLUSION

Johann Sebastian Bach was somebody who remembered that. It wasn't just SDG—*Soli Deo Gloria*, "to the glory of God alone"—that he inscribed on his composition manuscripts. He would begin a composition by scratching two letters into the upper left margin: JJ. *Jesu Juva*. "Jesus help me." As we enter this season of waiting, of anticipation of the coming salvation of our Lord, let us work not for our own glory, but toward the glory of God. Jesus help us.

Let me pray: *Heavenly Father, we thank you for giving us confidence in your Son, whose death and resurrection not only saves us, but strengthens us to the end. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*