



# Explore the Bible.®

Spring 2018 > *Clint Pressley, General Editor*



## *1,2 Corinthians*

LifeWay | Adults



# JESUS

## Jesus changes lives. And everyone needs the opportunity to hear the life-changing message of the gospel of Christ.

That conviction led Paul to Corinth, a city famous for its immorality and religious pluralism. He was Christ's ambassador bringing a life-changing message from God to the Corinthians: "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, and see, the new has come!" (2 Cor. 5:17).

The same gospel message Paul introduced in Corinth is good news for us too. Christ was with God the Father before the world was created. He became human and lived among humanity as Jesus of Nazareth. He came to show us what God the Father is like. He lived a sinless life, showing us how to live; and He died upon a cross to pay for our sins. God raised Him from the dead.

Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). He is waiting for you now.

- **Admit** to God that you are a sinner. Repent, turning away from your sin.
- **By faith, receive** Jesus Christ as God's Son and accept Jesus' gift of forgiveness from sin. He took the penalty for your sin by dying on the cross.
- **Confess** your faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

You may pray a prayer similar to this as you call on God to save you: "Dear God, I know that You love me. I confess my sin and need of salvation. I turn away from my sin and place my faith in Jesus as my Savior and Lord. In Jesus' name I pray, amen."

After you have received Jesus Christ into your life, tell a pastor or another Christian about your decision. Show others your faith in Christ by asking for baptism by immersion in your local church as a public expression of your faith.

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\*Evangelistic emphasis

## » MEET THE WRITER

**Hal Lane** wrote the sessions and the Bible book introduction in this issue of the Commentary. He serves as senior pastor of West Side Baptist Church in Greenwood, South Carolina, where he has ministered since 1989. In addition to his outstanding pastoral ministry, Hal has served as president of the South Carolina Baptist Convention (2003) and as a trustee for the denomination's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission.

Hal received Christ as his Savior when he was seven years old. He completed his education and ministry training at the University of South Carolina (B.A.) and Dallas Theological Seminary (Th.M). He and his wife, Eileen, have one grown son, Jonathan, who is married to Melissa. That couple has blessed Hal and Eileen with four grandchildren.

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**ERIC GEIGER**  
VICE PRESIDENT,  
LIFEWAY RESOURCES

**CLINT PRESSLEY**  
GENERAL EDITOR

**DAVID BRISCOE**  
CONTENT EDITOR

**DWAYNE MCCRARY**  
TEAM LEADER

**KEN BRADY**  
MANAGER, ADULT ONGOING  
BIBLE STUDIES

**MICHAEL KELLEY**  
DIRECTOR, GROUPS MINISTRY

SEND QUESTIONS/COMMENTS TO:

**CONTENT EDITOR**  
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# A WORD FROM **THE GENERAL EDITOR**



The church has never been perfect. Only the Lord of the church is perfect, a truth that is abundantly clear in 1,2 Corinthians. Here we find the gospel in all its glory and life with all its complexities. Paul wrote to a people who loved Christ but struggled with division of all kinds, manifold rebellion, and downright immorality. When you read and study these two books, you are reminded that although Jesus is Lord of the church, there is no perfect church.

Even so, in these two books we learn the centrality of the cross, the meaning of marriage, the danger of lust, and how a church should be structured. We learn the importance of spiritual gifts, the value of diversity, and the joy of taking the Lord's Supper.

Paul's letters to the church ground us in the gospel of Christ and fill us with resurrection hope. And this hope gives us strength for endurance so that in our struggle, we do not lose heart.

At this critical hour, an intense and thorough study of these two books is sure to bring nourishment to the famished soul and strength to any gospel-centered church. As you study 1,2 Corinthians, may the Spirit of God use the Word of God to anchor your confidence and hope in the Son of God.

## ***Clint Pressley***

*Clint Pressley serves as Senior Pastor of Hickory Grove Baptist Church in Charlotte, NC. He holds a Master of Divinity degree from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary and is working on a Doctor of Ministry from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.*

# INTRODUCTION TO 1,2 CORINTHIANS

At 11:40 p.m. on April 14, 1912, the RMS *Titanic* struck an iceberg in the North Atlantic while on its maiden voyage from England to America. Two hours and forty minutes later, in the early hours of April 15, the doomed ocean liner slipped beneath the icy waters. *Titanic's* builders touted the ship as unsinkable because of its massive size and innovative design. But they were wrong. The iceberg ripped a long gash along the ship's side, allowing the sea to pour into compartment after compartment. Eventually the ship stood on its submerged head, broke apart, and sank. Of the estimated twenty-two hundred passengers and crew on board, more than fifteen hundred died.

The fate of *Titanic* remains a dire warning against human pride. Long before that tragedy, the Hebrew Scriptures likewise warned that “pride comes before destruction, and an arrogant spirit before a fall” (Prov. 16:18). In the New Testament, the apostle Paul used a similar wisdom statement to warn the Corinthian church about the dangers of worldliness and spiritual arrogance. He cautioned those believers that “whoever thinks he stands must be careful not to fall” (1 Cor. 10:12).

Paul wrote the Letters of 1,2 Corinthians to call the believers in Corinth to repent of worldly actions and pursue true spirituality. As we study Paul's correspondence with that first-century church, we too will be challenged as believers and churches to assess our spiritual condition. Are we progressing on the course of holy living, or is worldliness seeping in and threatening our spiritual health? May we undertake this study with honesty and humility!

## » WRITER AND DESTINATION

The apostle Paul wrote the Letters of 1,2 Corinthians (1 Cor. 1:1; 2 Cor. 1:1). He initially preached the gospel in Corinth during his second missionary journey. That journey began when Paul and his missionary team left Antioch of Syria to visit churches that had been established on the first missionary journey (see Acts 15:36). Following those visits, the Holy Spirit guided Paul and his team northwestward to the city of Troas on the Aegean Sea coast (16:6-8). There Paul received a vision of a Macedonian man pleading with him to cross over the sea and help the people in that region (16:9).

Paul responded to the vision by leading his team to sail to Macedonia and preach the gospel in the cities of Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea (Acts 16:12-17:13). The team started churches in at least two of those cities but also encountered strong opposition to the gospel. Jewish opponents in particular hounded Paul in Thessalonica and Berea, eventually forcing the apostle to

move southward into Achaia and the famous city of Athens. Paul's brief ministry in Athens did not produce a church; however, a few people there became believers (17:34). After leaving Athens, Paul arrived in the city of Corinth, where he stayed and evangelized for the next year and a half (18:11).

Corinth was a key commercial city located at the intersection of two major trade routes in the province of Achaia. One route was the narrow land bridge that connected northern and southern Greece. The second route was a sea route. Corinth connected the ports of Lechaenum on the Adriatic Sea and Cenchrea on the Aegean Sea. Shippers offloaded their cargo at one port, hauled it overland to the other port, and then loaded it onto other ships docked there. Workers dragged smaller boats across the isthmus on a system of rollers without having to unload their cargo.

Corinth gained a reputation as a place of immorality. Its temple that was dedicated to Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love, featured acts of debauchery carried out by religious prostitutes. The city's moral reputation became so notorious that people coined the verb *corinthianize* to signify that someone was acting immorally. For this and other reasons, Corinth became a strategic city to Paul for reaching a diverse population with the gospel.

## ➤➤ PURPOSE

Paul's initial eighteen-month ministry in Corinth happened around AD 50–51 during the reign of the Roman proconsul Gallio (see Acts 18:11–12). Later, during his third missionary journey, Paul spent more than two years ministering in Ephesus, a city located on the eastern side of the Aegean Sea from Corinth. During his time in Ephesus, Paul evidently wrote a letter to the Corinthians that was not preserved (see 1 Cor. 5:9). A misunderstanding stemming from that letter as well as an oral report from the household of Chloe (1 Cor. 1:11) and a written list of questions sent by the Corinthian church prompted Paul to write the Letter of 1 Corinthians. He wrote to answer the Corinthians' questions on various issues of Christian living and motivate them to submit to Christ's lordship in their lives.

In the time between sending 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians, Paul made a brief visit to Corinth that included rebuke and correction of some church members (see 2 Cor. 2:1). Afterward, Paul evidently wrote a follow-up letter to the church—a letter that also has not been preserved but is referred to in 2 Corinthians 7:8. In preparation for yet a third visit to Corinth, Paul wrote 2 Corinthians around AD 55–56 from either Macedonia or Ephesus (see 2 Cor. 2:13). He wrote 2 Corinthians to call disobedient Corinthians to repent, hoping to avoid having to deliver further rebukes when he visited. He also wanted the church to be ready with its financial gift for the

impooverished Christians in Jerusalem. Finally, he provided a strong defense of his apostleship to counteract the accusations of false teachers.

## »» KEY THEMES IN 1,2 CORINTHIANS

*Godly wisdom*—Paul contrasted the wisdom of the world with the wisdom of God. Divisions in the church at Corinth demonstrated that the people followed the prideful wisdom of the world. The message of the cross demonstrated the epitome of God’s wisdom.

*True spirituality*—Those who are spiritual are led by the Spirit of God and have the mind of Christ. Worldliness leads to immorality, greed, strife, and many other sins. Christians are called to a life of true spirituality in Christ.

*Marriage and Celibacy*—Paul upheld the sanctity of marriage and urged believers who were married to be faithful. Paul also commended those who had the gift of celibacy and highlighted their advantages in serving Christ.

*Worship*—Paul stressed the need for order in worship and described different roles in worship for men and women. Paul stressed the need for serious and holy preparation in observing the Lord’s Supper.

*Spiritual gifts*—The Holy Spirit endows every believer with at least one spiritual gift. All gifts are to be valued and used to honor Christ and build up His body, the church. The energizing power of all gifts is Christlike love.

*Resurrection*—In response to false teachings that denied the importance of the resurrection, Paul declared the resurrection essential to Christianity. He affirmed the resurrection to be the hope that motivates all Christian service and takes away the fear of death.

*Comfort*—While God allows and uses believers’ suffering for His purposes, He also promises divine comfort in those afflictions. Christians honor the Lord as they endure suffering for His name’s sake.

*Resurrection and judgment*—Following death, believers will experience a bodily resurrection at Christ’s return. Each believer will give an account of his or her service before the judgment seat of Christ.

*Strength in weakness*—Paul testified that his sufferings led him to a greater faith in God’s power. Paul boasted of his weaknesses because they humbled him and taught him dependence on God.

*Generosity*—Paul urged the Corinthians to fulfill their pledges to help the impoverished Christians in Jerusalem. He used the examples of the Macedonians and Jesus Christ to motivate sacrificial giving. Paul declared that God loves cheerful givers and empowers every believer to give.

*Obedience*—Paul urged believers to repent and live obediently to the moral commands of God. He warned that continued rebellion would lead to discipline when he arrived.

# OUTLINES OF 1,2 CORINTHIANS

## 1 CORINTHIANS

### I. Greetings and Thanksgiving (1:1-9)

### II. Problems in the Church (1:10–6:20)

- A. Disunity (1:10–4:21)
- B. Immorality Tolerated (5:1–6:20)

### III. Answers to Questions from the Corinthians (7:1–14:40)

- A. Questions About Marriage (7:1-40)
- B. Limitations of Christian Liberty (8:1–11:1)
- C. Practices in Public Worship (11:2-16)
- D. Behavior at the Lord's Supper (11:17-34)
- E. Exercise of Spiritual Gifts (12:1–14:40)

### IV. The Resurrection of the Body (15:1-58)

### V. Conclusion (16:1-24)

## 2 CORINTHIANS

### I. Special Greetings (1:1-11)

### II. Paul's Ministry (1:12–7:16)

- A. Paul's Itinerary (1:12–2:13)
- B. Paul's Message (2:14–5:10)
- C. Paul's Purpose (5:11–7:16)

### III. A Collection for Needy Christians (8:1–9:15)

### IV. The Case Against False Apostles (10:1–13:10)

### V. Final Greetings (13:11-13)

# UNITED IN CHRIST

All believers share the same salvation and thus should be unified through that confession.

Laser technology has revolutionized many aspects of modern life since its introduction in the 1960s. We've witnessed incredible advances in medicine (laser surgery), construction (laser welding), communications (fiber optic technology), and the military (laser-guided weapons)—to name just a few areas in which laser technology has been used.

What is a laser? Inventors first coined this term as an acronym for the phrase “light amplification by stimulated emission of radiation.” When we walk into a dark room and cut on the light switch, the bulbs in the overhead fixture emit a broad spectrum of photons (light particles) throughout the room. We literally fill the space with zillions of tiny pieces of light that flit excitedly around the room bouncing off walls, furniture, people, and each other until the light is switched off. By contrast, the laser uses a property known as coherence to concentrate those zillions of photons into a highly amplified beam of light. All of the photons stick together and go in the same direction, thus creating a power far greater than the broadly scattered light particles emitted from a bulb.

What the property of coherence gives to a laser, spiritual unity gives to the church. When believers demonstrate their unity in Christ, they provide a powerful, focused testimony of the transformative gospel. Indeed, their unity reflects the bond that exists within the Trinity. The Scriptures teach that there is one God who exists eternally in three Persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). The three Persons of the Trinity exist in perfect unity. Moreover, Jesus prayed that His followers might enjoy the same bond of unity that exists in the Godhead (John 17:20-23).

Because of sin's lingering influence in a fallen world, believers have not always practiced the unity they have in Christ. The first-century church in Corinth was a case in point. Having started the church, Paul later heard that the congregation had splintered into factions. Without unity among the believers, a host of other problems developed in the church as well. Therefore, Paul addressed the issue of spiritual unity first.

# UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

## 1 CORINTHIANS 1:1–4:21

Paul spent more than two years in Ephesus and the surrounding area while on his third missionary journey (see Acts 19:8,10; 20:31). During that time, he received disturbing news about problems in the church at Corinth. About that same time, he received a list of questions from the Corinthians about various matters of Christian conduct. Paul wrote the Letter of 1 Corinthians to help the Corinthian church address its problems and questions.

In the letter's opening salutation (1:1-3), Paul gently reminded the Corinthians of his authority as an "apostle of Christ Jesus" and their calling as "saints" to live holy lives under Christ's lordship. He greeted them with "grace" and "peace" from God, hinting that his letter contained a mix of rebuke, correction, instruction, and encouragement.

Paul loved the Corinthian believers and cared deeply about their spiritual welfare. He addressed them as their spiritual father in the faith, thanking God for them and reminding them of the grace God showed by sending the gospel to them through Paul (1:4-9). Further, he urged them to trust God to keep on strengthening them as they lived in anticipation of Christ's return. He wanted them to be blameless on that day; therefore, they needed to acknowledge and repent of the ways they were falling short of their calling.

In 1:10-25, Paul addressed the Corinthians' problem of disunity. By splintering into factions centered on different Christian leaders, the church acted like the foolish world. The gospel Paul preached to them was the message of the cross—"Christ crucified" (1:23). We will explore these verses in this session, searching for ways they can instruct us today as individual believers and as churches.

In 1:26–2:16, Paul contrasted worldly wisdom to God's wisdom. God chose to save "the weak in the world to shame the strong" (1:27). Paul did not preach a gospel of human wisdom and power but rather the message of "Jesus Christ and him crucified" (2:2). Unbelievers consider Paul's message to be foolish, thereby revealing that they reject the Holy Spirit and have no ability to understand spiritual truth. Believers, on the other hand, receive God's wisdom because they have the Spirit, who gives them "the mind of Christ" (2:16).

Paul addressed the issue of spiritual immaturity in chapter 3. He described the spiritually immature believer as one who was not ready to leave off certain worldly behaviors and live a mature, holy lifestyle. As far as Paul was concerned, the individuals creating factions within the Corinthian church showed they were "babies in Christ" (3:1). He reminded the Corinthians

that while church leaders played a role in cultivating spiritual growth, only God could give the growth. Growing believers needed to stop dividing over misplaced devotion to God’s servants.

In chapter 4, Paul identified himself as a servant of Christ who would one day give an account of his stewardship. Paul urged the Corinthians to examine their lives too. He warned that he would discipline any unrepentant troublemakers when he came to Corinth for a visit.

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

### CALL FOR UNITY (1 Cor. 1:10)

Paul grew concerned upon hearing the Corinthian church had splintered into factions that were centered primarily on different Christian leaders, including him. He urged the believers to demonstrate their unity in Christ.

#### VERSE 10

**Now I urge you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree in what you say, that there be no divisions among you, and that you be united with the same understanding and the same conviction.**

The words **now I urge you** mark a transition from Paul’s opening greeting to the body of the letter. The Greek verb rendered *urge* (“beseech,” KJV; “appeal to,” ESV, NIV) expresses urgency. Paul wanted all of the Corinthian believers (**brothers and sisters**) to realize the seriousness of their situation and take immediate steps to remedy their spiritual problems. He wrote to them not only as a concerned Christian brother but also as an apostle with Christ’s authority (**in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ**). Paul’s words constituted a Holy Spirit-inspired message bearing Christ’s authority.

Spiritual immaturity and disobedience lay at the heart of the Corinthians’ disunity. Therefore, Paul described actions they needed to take to refocus on Christ, the source of true unity. First, they needed to **agree in what** they proclaimed. This phrase literally means “speak the same thing,” but it does not imply that Christians are to speak the same exact words and sentences. Rather, the phrase emphasizes that believers are to agree on whom the gospel is about (Christ) and what it says about Him. Paul later referred to the unifying message of the church as “the word of the cross” (1:18).

The Corinthian believers splintered into factions because they focused on Christian personalities rather than on Christ and emphasized nonessential

matters over the central gospel message: Christ saves sinners and sets them apart as God's holy people. Sadly, some Christians today make these same mistakes, and their churches reap the consequences of discord and disunity. Too many church splits can be traced to members' spiritual immaturity, divisions over leadership personnel, misplaced priorities, and inability to distinguish between essential and nonessential matters.

Second, Paul told the Corinthians there should be **no divisions** in the church. The Greek word rendered *divisions* comes from a verb that literally means "to tear, rip apart." It is the basis of the English term *schism*. Paul did not imagine that the Corinthians would always agree on every decision the church made. He and Barnabas, after all, had a sharp disagreement at the outset of the second missionary journey about whether to reinstate John Mark to the team (Acts 15:36-40). These two Christian leaders resolved their disagreement by keeping the priority on the gospel mission. They did not divide over the gospel message or question the genuineness of the other's faith in Christ and doctrinal integrity.

Paul feared, however, that the schism in the Corinthian church revealed a dangerous breakdown of unity, not merely some disagreements. Groups of immature believers formed cliques that agreed with one another and disagreed with others in the congregation on essential matters. They did not work together but worked against one another. Their strenuous efforts were not aimed at resisting Satan or the world in opposition to Christ but at resisting one another. They were a house divided!

Third, Paul urged the Corinthian believers to **be united with the same understanding and the same conviction**. The Greek verb translated *be united* ("be perfectly joined together," KJV) was used in the medical field to describe the resetting of broken bones. Just as a broken bone could be restored by keeping the pieces joined together with a splint or cast, even so the Corinthians could take steps to restore their spiritual unity. Presently they followed their own worldly desires and not the mind of Christ. Their self-centered, worldly thinking resulted in disunity and divisions. Paul knew that the only hope of restoring unity among the Corinthians lay in resetting their *understanding* ("mind," KJV, ESV, NIV) and *conviction* ("judgment," KJV, ESV; "thought," NIV) on Christ and the gospel.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Unity" on page 1621 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How is the unity that exists within the Trinity a pattern for the church? What are the sources of Christian unity?

## CONTEMPT FOR DIVISIONS (1 Cor. 1:11-16)

Members of a particular household informed Paul about the divisions that had formed in the church. In these verses, Paul identified the factions and pointed out the foolishness of their rivalry.

### VERSE 11

**For it has been reported to me about you, my brothers and sisters, by members of Chloe's people, that there is rivalry among you.**

We know almost nothing about Chloe [KLOH ee] except that her name—the name is feminine—means “verdant.” It appears only in this verse in all of Scripture. The phrase **members of Chloe's people** (“them which are of the house of Chloe,” KJV; “some from Chloe's household,” NIV) can be literally translated “those of Chloe.” Bible scholars point out that this phrase can refer to business associates, household servants, or family members. Further, we cannot say for sure whether Chloe and her *people* were believers, were members of the Corinthian church, or were even residents of Corinth. We only know they were aware of the Corinthian church's situation and Paul trusted their report.

The word rendered **rivalry** (“contentions,” KJV; “quarrels,” NIV) refers to strife or contentious divisions. Paul included this term in several lists of sinful behaviors (see Rom. 1:29; Gal. 5:20; 1 Tim. 6:4). The Corinthians had no desire to treat one another with respect and humility. Instead they engaged in heated, divisive arguments that resulted in broken relationships and hard feelings within the congregation.

### VERSE 12

**What I am saying is this: One of you says, “I belong to Paul,” or “I belong to Apollos,” or “I belong to Cephas,” or “I belong to Christ.”**

The Corinthians' arguments led to the formation of factions centered on various Christian personalities. The phrase **one of you** (“every one of you,” KJV; “each one of you,” ESV) and the fourfold repetition of the first-person singular pronoun in the phrase **I belong** may indicate that certain individuals in the church served as the factions' ringleaders. Evidently, though, most if not all the members had chosen their preferred group.

Three of the factions centered on well-known, well-respected Christian leaders. **Paul**, of course, had planted the church during the second missionary journey when he spent eighteen months in Corinth (Acts 18:11). He considered himself to be the Corinthians' spiritual father (1 Cor. 4:15). He later described them as “our letter [of recommendation], written on our

hearts, known and read by everyone” (2 Cor. 3:2). Nevertheless, Paul had been careful to proclaim the gospel centered on “Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2) and not on himself.

**Apollos** preached eloquently and effectively used the Scriptures in convincing Jewish audiences that Jesus is the Messiah (Acts 18:24-25). After being mentored in Ephesus by Paul’s coworkers, Apollos moved to Corinth, where he “was a great help to those who by grace had believed” (18:27). Paul later spoke of Apollos as a fellow servant of Christ who watered the seeds of the gospel that the apostle had previously planted in Corinth (1 Cor. 3:6).

The faction belonging to **Cephas** [SEE fuhs] centered on Simon Peter. *Cephas*, an Aramaic name meaning “rock,” corresponded to the Greek name *Peter* that Jesus gave to that disciple (see John 1:42). Whether Simon Peter ever ministered in Corinth is unclear. Some Bible scholars suggest this faction of the Corinthians simply aligned itself with Peter because of his reputation as the lead disciple of Jesus.

Another faction of church members claimed allegiance to **Christ**. Paul apparently included this group among the disrupters of unity because these members rejected the other three groups and boasted of having a superior spiritual life. Another view of this fourth group suggests that Paul was using irony to show the foolishness of forming cliques based on allegiances to Christian leaders. In other words, church unity cannot survive—much less thrive—where some believers have a greater allegiance to Christian leaders than they have to Christ.

## VERSE 13

### **Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in Paul’s name?**

Paul challenged the Corinthians’ divisive focus on Christian leaders by asking three rhetorical questions. First, did they think Christ was **divided**? The obvious answer was no. Therefore, the members should have realized how absurd it was to divide the body of Christ (the church) into competing factions. Their lack of unity misrepresented the ideal Christ had for unity among His followers (John 17:11,21).

Paul pushed his line of questioning a step further. Had he (or any revered Christian leader) been **crucified** for the Corinthians? Again, the obvious answer was no. Paul, Peter, and Apollos were all alive and preaching the gospel. Jesus Christ alone was crucified for the forgiveness of sins. He alone accomplished the believer’s salvation by His atoning death on the cross. The church’s unity thus rests on one foundation: “the blood of Jesus [God’s] Son cleanses us from all sin” (1 John 1:9).

Finally, Paul asked if any of the Corinthians had been **baptized in his name**. Gospel evangelists baptized new believers “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” as Jesus specified in the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19). Paul explained in his Letter to the Romans that water baptism portrayed the spiritual union of believers with Christ (Rom. 6:3-4). The Corinthian believers needed to remember that their unity came from Christ, not from the Christian leader who baptized them.

#### VERSES 14-16

**I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one can say you were baptized in my name. I did, in fact, baptize the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't recall if I baptized anyone else.**

Paul thanked God that he had baptized only a few of the Corinthian church members. **Crispus** [KRISS puhz] is probably the same person mentioned in Acts 18:8 as “the leader of the synagogue” in Corinth. He and his entire household became believers while Paul was in the city. **Gaius** [GAY yuhz] may be the same individual Paul commended for his hospitality in Romans 16:23. Some Bible scholars also suggest that Gaius might be the same person identified as Titius Justus in Acts 18:7. If that is the case, Gaius's home sat next door to the synagogue in Corinth, and Gaius allowed Paul to use his home as a base for ministry after the apostle's break with the synagogue.

Paul further recalled that he had baptized **the household of Stephanas** [STEF uh nuhs]. First Corinthians 16:15 reveals that this man and his family were Paul's first converts in Corinth, and they “devoted themselves to serving the saints.” Stephanas and two other Corinthian men were present with Paul when he composed 1 Corinthians (see 16:17). Perhaps Stephanas reminded Paul that the apostle had baptized him and his family.

Paul stressed in verses 14-16 that Christian baptism unified believers because it was done in the name of Christ, not in the name of the one administering it. Those who carry out baptisms serve the Lord. By emphasizing this truth, Paul undercut the arguments of those who divided into factions based on misplaced devotion to their favorite Christian leaders.

### EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Baptism” on pages 170–172 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What thoughts do you have when you see a new convert baptized in your church?

## THE CROSS THAT DIVIDES (1 Cor. 1:17-25)

Having rebuked the participants in the party divisions, Paul sought to draw the Corinthians to the true source of unity for Christians. What unites Christians, however, also separates them from the world.

### VERSE 17

**For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ will not be emptied of its effect.**

We should keep in context Paul's words about not being sent **to baptize**. In the Great Commission, Jesus included baptism as part of the church's global mission of making disciples (see Matt. 28:19). Being baptized in water portrays the gospel, but in itself baptism is not the gospel message. That is, we are saved not by being immersed in water but by uniting with—trusting—Jesus in His atoning death, burial, and resurrection.

Paul sought to correct the Corinthians' misplaced priority. Their focus on matters of baptism rather than the gospel resulted in disunity and division. They needed to get their priority back on the message Paul had proclaimed and they had believed: the gospel message. He reminded the Corinthians their salvation did not come through any preacher's **eloquent wisdom** ("wisdom of words," KJV; "words of human wisdom," NIV). Greek culture placed a premium on human wisdom and eloquence. Acts 18:24 describes Apollos as "an eloquent man," and some of the Corinthians focused too much on this leader's outstanding speaking ability. In doing so, they lost their focus on God's wisdom and power that **the cross of Christ** demonstrates.

### VERSE 18

**For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but it is the power of God to us who are being saved.**

Paul wanted the Corinthians to refocus on **the word of the cross**. The Greek term (*logos*) that is rendered *word* refers in this context to the gospel message. In the opening words of John's Gospel, the term appears as a name for Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God who became flesh, lived among us, and revealed grace and truth to us (John 1:1,14-18). The Son's ultimate revelation of grace and truth came by the most unlikely means: His death on the cross. The unbelieving world hears such a message and thinks it is **foolishness**. Tragically, those who refuse to believe *the word of the cross* **are perishing**.

For believers, however, the message of the cross reveals **the power of God** to save sinners. The cross reveals that salvation cannot be gained through

human wisdom, power, wealth, or fame. The amazing message of the cross is this: “the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 6:23). For all of the eloquence and sophistication in human wisdom, it has absolutely no power to save us from our sins.

#### VERSE 19

**For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and I will set aside the intelligence of the intelligent.**

Paul quoted from Isaiah 29:14 to support his argument concerning the inadequacy of human wisdom. The Greek word rendered **intelligence** refers to the capacity to synthesize multiple facts or concepts into a logical conclusion. Paul used Isaiah’s words to warn the Corinthian believers they were traveling down the same path of spiritual rebellion the ancient Israelites had traveled.

#### VERSE 20

**Where is the one who is wise? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the debater of this age? Hasn’t God made the world’s wisdom foolish?**

With a series of rhetorical questions, Paul further emphasized the foolishness of trusting in human wisdom for salvation. The spiritually immature believers in Corinth were more impressed by wise men, teachers, and skilled debaters than by God’s wisdom as demonstrated through the cross. Paul reminded the Corinthians that human wisdom was empty and foolish when compared to God’s wisdom. Only God’s wisdom could lead them to salvation.

#### VERSE 21

**For since, in God’s wisdom, the world did not know God through wisdom, God was pleased to save those who believe through the foolishness of what is preached.**

Verse 21 points to the uniqueness of the Christian gospel in contrast to humanistic philosophies and religions. Paul declared that **the world did not know God through wisdom**. When we try to devise our own idea or concept of deity, we always fall short. We cannot discover Him; we can only respond in faith to what He reveals about Himself to us. The writer of Hebrews declared that in Jesus Christ God “has spoken to us by His Son ... [who] is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact expression of his nature” (Heb. 1:2-3). Consequently, salvation comes not by intellectual discovery but rather by faith in Jesus **through the foolishness of what is preached**.

## VERSES 22-23

**For the Jews ask for signs and the Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles.**

Paul described lost humanity as composed of unbelieving **Jews** and **Greeks**. In this context the term *Greeks* represents the entire Gentile world. The Jews insisted on seeing certain divine **signs**—miraculous events—before they would believe that God was active in history. On the other hand, Greek culture trusted too much in human beings' self-discovery. Neither culture was willing to accept the substitutionary death of Christ on the cross. To the Jews, the cross was a **stumbling block**; to non-Jews it was **foolishness**.

## VERSES 24-25

**Yet to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God, because God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.**

The phrase **those who are called** refers to people—both Jews and Gentiles—who respond to the gospel by trusting in Jesus Christ as Savior. One result of that faith-experience is the realization that **Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God**. That realization comes not through self-discovery or intellectual prowess but through a faith-relationship with Jesus Christ.

Paul reminded the Corinthians (and us) that salvation is a work of God's grace and power. The phrase **God's foolishness** refers to the message of the cross. His truth is infinitely greater than **human wisdom** or **strength**. For this reason, salvation comes only by grace through faith in Jesus. The divided Corinthian believers needed to refocus and unite behind the message of the cross. Christians today likewise should unite around exalting Christ and sharing the gospel with a lost world.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

In your witnessing efforts, what stumbling blocks to believing the gospel have people expressed to you? How did you respond to their doubts and hesitations about Christ? Having studied this session, how would you say that faith in Christ engenders unity among believers in your church?

# GLORIFYING GOD

Believers honor God through holy living.

American academic Theodore Roszak introduced the term *counterculture* in 1969. It appears (written as two words) in the title of his best-known book *The Making of a Counter Culture*. Roszak and other sociologists of the time took note of how a new generation of youth and young adults in the 1960s rejected many of the previous generation's norms and traditions. Major shifts in American culture and attitudes followed as the new generation moved into places of power and influence.

In many ways, the church of the Lord Jesus Christ has always been a counterculture movement. When Jesus prayed that His followers would be in the world but not of the world (see John 17:11,14), He set the church on a countercultural course. He called for His followers to have holy attitudes and live godly lifestyles that run counter to the self-centered, sinful lifestyles prevalent in worldly culture. As the apostle Paul explained, "Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another" (Gal. 5:24-26).

The problem is that individual Christians and church congregations do not always live up to their holy calling in Christ. Instead of being countercultural as the church in the world, we have started to look more like the world in the church. We see a steadily increasing acceptance among the Christian population in America of divorce, premarital sex, cohabitation, homosexuality, and pornography in entertainment. We seem to have a higher toleration for violence, corruption, and injustice in all facets of society. And we get caught up more and more in the materialistic drive for wealth, fame, and power. In other words, the church in America today desperately needs to take to heart Paul's message to the first-century Corinthian church.

The church in Corinth began well. The gospel Paul preached ran counter to the corrupt, immoral values of the city's Greco-Roman culture. Later, however, the church started to falter because of spiritual and moral compromise. It looked and acted more like the world than the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul called on the Corinthians to repent of their worldliness.

# UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

## 1 CORINTHIANS 5:1–6:20

Paul began 1 Corinthians with a brief greeting and commendation (1:1-9). Then he addressed the problem of disunity among the congregation (1:10–4:21). In chapters 5 and 6, he gave the church instruction on dealing with several specific incidents of immoral behavior by church members.

Immoral behavior was all too common in Corinth, as was mentioned in the Introduction (see p. 7). However, the incident that Paul dealt with in 5:1-8 was scandalous even for that city. A male church member was “sleeping with his father’s wife” (5:1). To compound the sin, the majority of the Corinthian believers seemed to be proud of their tolerant attitude toward the offenders. Paul rebuked the church for allowing this sinful situation to continue. He commanded the members to assemble for the purpose of confronting the offenders and, if necessary, expelling them from the congregation until they repented.

In 5:9-13, Paul clarified a misunderstanding that stemmed from a previous letter—now lost—that he wrote to the Corinthians. In that letter, he had instructed the church “not to associate with sexually immoral people” (5:9). He had not meant that believers should withdraw from any contact with unbelievers at work, in the marketplace, and so forth. He meant, rather, that the church must not tolerate immoral behavior by church members. Christians needed to hold one another accountable for holy living.

In 6:1-11, Paul addressed the shameful practice of Christians settling their disputes with one another in secular courts. He emphasized two problems created by this practice. First, taking disputes before secular judges suggested the Corinthians believed they did not have people in the congregation who could deliver a wise, fair, and Christ-honoring judgment. Second, taking disputes to secular courts revealed an unwillingness to humbly turn the other cheek even for the sake of other believers. Paul urged the Corinthians to settle their disputes in Christlike ways.

This session’s study focuses on 6:12-20 and Paul’s urgent exhortation for the Corinthians to “flee sexual immorality” (6:18). The apostle reminded believers that Christ’s lordship extends over all aspects of life, including their physical bodies. God-given physical desires play an important role in human life, but Christians should not be ruled by their physical desires. Sexual immorality in all its forms is a sin that perverts the gift of physical desires. It dishonors the triune God who created us, purchased our salvation through the Son, and gave the Holy Spirit to live in us and empower us for holy living. Believers are to glorify God with their bodies.

# EXPLORE THE TEXT

## FOCUSED ON CHRIST'S LORDSHIP (1 Cor. 6:12-14)

Paul realized that some of the Corinthians had adopted a false and destructive belief regarding the believer's freedom in Christ. The false teaching may have emphasized that since God gave humans their physical desires, we are free to gratify those desires in any conceivable way. Paul refuted the Corinthians' gross error and the misconduct stemming from it.

### VERSE 12

**“Everything is permissible for me,” but not everything is beneficial. “Everything is permissible for me,” but I will not be mastered by anything.**

Bible scholars have debated the origin of the words **everything is permissible for me**. Did Paul write these words at this point in his letter as a theological premise about Christian freedom? Or was he quoting back to the Corinthians a saying they spouted to justify some church members' immoral behavior? The same saying appears twice again in 1 Corinthians 10:23. To be sure, Paul often emphasized the believer's freedom in Christ but always with the understanding that Christian freedom is not a license to sin (see Gal. 5:1,13). Whatever the origin of the saying, the Corinthians clearly had corrupted its meaning to justify sinful behavior.

The Greek verb rendered *is permissible* (“are lawful,” KJV, ESV) appears a number of times in the Gospels to refer to behavior either permitted or disallowed in the Mosaic law (see Matt. 12:2,12; Mark 10:2; Luke 14:3; John 5:10). When Paul preached the gospel of salvation by grace through faith in Christ, he emphasized that no amount of good works—that is, obedience to the law—can justify sinners in God's sight (Rom. 3:20). To be free from the law, then, primarily means freedom from its condemnation of us as sinners (Rom. 8:1-4). Through redemption in Christ we are set free to live moral, Christlike lives by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

Paul may have made a distinction here between ceremonial laws and moral commands in the law. In churches with a mixture of Jewish and Gentile converts, dissension sometimes arose between the two groups over whether Gentile believers were required to observe Jewish ceremonial laws and rituals. The Jerusalem Council had concluded that Gentile males did not have to undergo circumcision to become Christians, yet converts were directed to “abstain from food offered to idols, from [consuming] blood, from eating anything that has been strangled, and from sexual immorality” (Acts 15:29).

Paul rejected the attitude that Christian freedom permitted all kinds of behavior. Some actions might be permissible but not **beneficial** (“expedient,” KJV; “helpful,” ESV) to oneself or to other people. Other behaviors might become habitual and thus become addictions. Paul declared that believers should avoid becoming enslaved to their physical desires. Harmless practices are no longer harmless when they become obsessions. We have rebelled against the lordship of Jesus Christ when bodily appetites control our actions. Our freedom is not in doing whatever we want but in doing God’s will.

## VERSE 13

**“Food is for the stomach and the stomach for food,” and God will do away with both of them. However, the body is not for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.**

By putting quotation marks around the words **food is for the stomach and the stomach for food**, modern English Bible translations suggest that, as in verse 12, Paul was quoting back to the Corinthians a saying they used to justify sexual immorality. We hear people use similar misguided arguments today: “God made us this way. We’re just satisfying the physical appetites He gave us. Just as we fill our stomachs with all kinds of food when we’re hungry, we likewise need to constantly satisfy our sexual desires.”

Some Bible scholars detect a form of ancient Greek dualism underlying the saying about food. Dualism is a philosophical idea that emphasizes the separateness of the soul (spirit) and body in human beings. The soul inhabits the physical body in this life, but at death the body falls away in decay while the soul lives on. Based on that premise, therefore, dualists argue that anything having to do with satisfying physical or sexual appetites is irrelevant to salvation. It doesn’t matter what people do with their bodies since the flesh will be cast off at death. Paul spoke forcefully against this concept and declared that the actions done by the body are subject to God’s judgment.

Paul responded that one day **God will do away with** the mortal aspects of human nature. In the life to come, believers will be resurrected and clothed with bodies that are suited for the eternal, spiritual realm. The apostle addressed this theme in great detail in 1 Corinthians 15. At this point in his letter, however, he focused sharply on the Corinthians’ corrupted views of human sexuality and Christ’s lordship.

God did not give us physical bodies so that we would be ruled by selfish desires. He gave us physical bodies so that we might honor and serve Him on this earth (**the body ... is for the Lord, and the Lord for the body**). We are not free to satisfy our physical desires in any way we please. We are to satisfy these appetites, including sexual desires, in ways that honor Him.

## VERSE 14

### **God raised up the Lord and will also raise us up by his power.**

The doctrine of the resurrection took center stage in Paul's call for sexual purity. Believers can be sure they will be raised from the dead because **God raised up the Lord**. The resurrection of Jesus guarantees that God **will also raise us up by his power**. Therefore, the believer's actions in this life hold great significance for the life to come. God will transform our physical bodies at that time. "For this corruptible body must be clothed with incorruptibility, and this mortal body must be clothed with immortality" (1 Cor. 15:53).

## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the section "Jesus as Lord" in the article titled "Lord" on pages 1024–1026 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How would you explain to an unbeliever the difference Jesus' lordship makes in your daily thoughts and actions? How does the promise of resurrection in Christ motivate you to live a morally pure life?

## JOINED WITH CHRIST (1 Cor. 6:15-17)

In verses 12-14, Paul argued forcefully against the Corinthians' casual attitude toward immorality. He then reminded believers in verses 15-17 that sexually immoral behavior dishonors the body of Christ.

## VERSE 15

### **Don't you know that your bodies are a part of Christ's body? So should I take a part of Christ's body and make it part of a prostitute? Absolutely not!**

Paul used the words **don't you know** to remind the Corinthian believers of truths he had previously taught them (see 3:16; 5:6; 6:2,3,9). The words likely expressed an impatient reprimand. In other words, the church should have had no question about rejecting sexually immoral behavior. Paul had no doubt taught them that by faith they became **a part of Christ's body**.

The New Testament portrays believers' relationship with Christ as a shared life. That is, Christians are not simply bound together by a common doctrine or label. We are not simply members of a club bound by a set of rules. We are spiritually connected to Jesus as branches are connected to a vine (John 15:5). By faith we are united with Him in His death, burial, and

resurrection (Rom. 6). This spiritual union thus has implications for us in ways that relate to the use of our physical bodies.

Paul asked rhetorically if it seemed proper for the believer to **take a part of Christ's body and make it part of a prostitute**. The words **absolutely not** indicate that believers of any age should view such an action to be unthinkable offensive not only to Christ but also to His body, the church. The word rendered *prostitute* ("harlot," KJV) probably reveals the specific nature of the immorality occurring in the Corinthian church.

First-century Greco-Roman culture accepted and promoted prostitution as a common practice. People knew that the city of Corinth had a reputation for debauchery and immorality, not to mention the religious prostitution practiced at the city's pagan temples. An ancient Greek writer reported that the temple of Aphrodite in Corinth alone boasted of having one thousand cultic prostitutes available. Perhaps some of the Christians in Corinth participated in pagan sexual rituals before their conversions and were drifting back into those former sinful practices. Paul asked them to consider how someone joined to Christ could ever choose to be joined to a prostitute.

Sadly, today we are witnessing in many places around the world, including the United States, a return to the immoral cultural norms of the ancient Greco-Roman world. Despite the damage that sexually immoral behavior can inflict through disease, destruction of marriages, human trafficking, and the degradation of women, many people continue to defend it as a form of freedom. The reality is that sexual immorality leads to destructive bondage that tears at the very foundations of society.

## VERSE 16

**Don't you know that anyone joined to a prostitute is one body with her? For Scripture says, The two will become one flesh.**

The phrase **don't you know** appears here for the fifth of six times in chapter 6 (see also 6:2,3,9,15,19). It reveals Paul's frustration with some of the Corinthians' ungodly thinking and actions. They should have known by then that immoral behavior was sinful.

Paul reminded the Corinthians that engaging in sexual relations with **a prostitute**—religious or otherwise—represents a physical and spiritual union of the two lives. The offender becomes **one body** with the prostitute. For the believer in whom Christ's Spirit lives, such an act ought to be considered reprehensible.

With this argument, Paul confronted the myth that casual sex has no consequences for those who engage in it. Sadly, this pagan first-century myth persists in modern secular thinking. But as Paul pointed out, Christians have

a strong scriptural basis for insisting that immoral sexual behavior damages everyone involved and others as well. Quoting a portion of Genesis 2:24, the apostle reminded the Corinthians that by design God placed the human sexual relationship exclusively in the context of the marriage bond. The statement **the two will become one flesh** suggests an intimacy between a husband and wife that is greater than a mere physical act.

Paul quoted the entirety of Genesis 2:24 in his Letter to the Ephesians to explain that the intimate marriage bond between husband and wife well illustrates the spiritual union of Christ and the church (Eph. 5:31-32). This comparison emphasizes the faith-relationship of Christians to Jesus and the need for faithfulness to Him in that spiritual bond. Paul essentially warned the Corinthian believers that visiting pagan temple prostitutes or committing other acts of sexual immorality constituted spiritual adultery!

The claim of many in modern secular culture that casual sex hurts no one flies in the face of reality. Sexual immorality takes a toll on public health through the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases. Data show an unmistakable link between sexual immorality and rates of intentional abortions. There is a growing consensus that prolonged use of pornography creates public health problems. In addition, we can't escape the emotional and spiritual guilt produced by immoral sexual behavior.

## VERSE 17

### **But anyone joined to the Lord is one spirit with him.**

Some Bible scholars suggest that Paul used a lesser-to-greater argument in this verse. That is, the faith-union of believers to Christ is greater even than the physical union of a husband and wife in marriage. We, as believers, are **one spirit with him**.

The believer's union with Christ is not one of equality, however. We are parts or members of Christ's body, but He is the head of the body (Col. 1:18). Our spiritual life as believers comes as a result of our union with Christ who is a "life-giving spirit" (1 Cor. 15:45). This spiritual union has implications for how we use our physical bodies. We are to glorify God with them (6:20).

## EXPLORE FURTHER

What changes would you make in your daily activities if the Lord Jesus accompanied you at all times in physical form? How does it encourage you as a believer that Jesus is with you spiritually in all circumstances?

## BOUGHT WITH A PRICE (1 Cor. 6:18-20)

### VERSE 18

**Flee sexual immorality! Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the person who is sexually immoral sins against his own body.**

Mincing no words, Paul commanded the Corinthian believers to **flee sexual immorality**. The Greek verb rendered *flee* appears in a form that implies continuing action. In other words, believers were to keep on fleeing from the daily onslaught of sexual temptations in Corinthian culture. One fourth-century Christian theologian likened Paul's command to the actions of Joseph when he fled from the unwelcome sexual advances of Potiphar's wife. Joseph left "his garment in her hand, ... escaped and ran outside" (Gen. 39:12). Paul later used the same verb in 1 Corinthians 10:14 to command believers to flee from idolatry. The unending barrage of sexual images and language on TV and the Internet today makes Paul's directive all the more crucial to obey.

The statement that **every other sin a person commits is outside the body** is difficult to understand. Some Bible interpreters have suggested this might be another saying of the disobedient Corinthians to justify their sinful actions (see 6:12-13). If that was the case, the statement implied a false belief that body and spirit had no real connection. In other words, physical actions such as sexual immorality carried no spiritual consequences.

Another view, however, holds that Paul made this statement based on his argument regarding the believer's spiritual union with Christ. That is, sexual sin called for radical avoidance because of its damaging impact on the believer's **own body** and spiritual well-being. Paul built a foundation for the assertion he was about to make regarding the uniqueness of sexual immorality as sin. Such sin violates a basic fact about believers' physical existence: their bodies belong to the Lord and are to be used for His glory.

In either view, Paul did not diminish the seriousness of other sins; rather, he emphasized the heinous nature of sexual immorality that was considered acceptable by some Christians in Corinth. Christians today should take to heart Paul's warning about the seriousness of immorality. The present-day cultural glorification of casual sex reflects the opposite of biblical truth.

### VERSE 19

**Don't you know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God? You are not your own,**

For a sixth time in this chapter, Paul chided the Corinthians for their willful ignorance of spiritual truth (**don't you know**). He reminded them that the

believer's **body is a temple of the Holy Spirit**. In 3:16-17, he referred to church collectively as "God's temple." Here in 6:19 he applied the figure of speech to individual believers. The word translated *temple* usually appears in the New Testament in reference to the Lord's sanctuary in Jerusalem (Matt. 23:16; 27:51; Luke 1:9). In the innermost room of that sanctuary, the holy of holies, God's presence dwelt powerfully in the midst of His people. Only the high priest could enter the holy of holies once each year to make an atonement sacrifice for the people's sins. That relationship changed, however, with Jesus' atoning death on the cross—a change signified in Matthew's Gospel by the ripping of the temple curtain from top to bottom (see Matt. 27:51). Under the new covenant established in Jesus' blood, believers receive the promise that the Holy Spirit will live in them (John 14:17). The body of each believer, therefore, serves as a sanctuary for God's presence.

The reality of the Holy Spirit's living in believers has profound implications for what we do with our bodies. Just as God's people in the Old Testament honored the temple building as a holy place for God's presence, in Christ believers are to consider their bodies as holy sanctuaries, set apart for God's use (1 Cor. 1:2; Rom. 12:1). If we confess that Christ is our Lord, this confession includes the recognition that our lives—mind, body, and spirit—belong to Him. As Paul declared, **"You are not your own."**

Paul's concern for the Corinthians in this matter centered primarily on the misuse of their bodies in sexual immorality. We need to remember, however, that there are other implications of the reality that the Holy Spirit lives in us as believers. While we are to flee from all types of sexually immoral behavior, we also do well to avoid destructive physical habits that damage our health and compromise our ability to serve God and others. Christians today too often fail to care for their health and fail to take responsibility for their poor choices. Like all people, of course, Christians may encounter health issues and physical disabilities that are beyond our control. We can glorify God *through* those situations as people see His power and grace working in us (see 2 Cor. 12:9-10).

## VERSE 20

**for you were bought at a price. So glorify God with your body.**

Paul used the language of redemption when he reminded the Corinthian believers that God had **bought** them **at a price**. By using this concept in the context of his call for sexual purity, Paul may have had in mind the Old Testament account of the Israelite prophet Hosea (see Hos. 1–3). Hosea married a woman who engaged in prostitution—probably religious prostitution connected with the pagan deity Baal. She became so unfaithful that she sold herself into slavery. At God's direction, Hosea went and found

his destitute wife, bought her freedom, and brought her back into his house. In a much greater way, Paul reminded, God has redeemed believers at an unthinkable price: the death of Jesus Christ on the cross (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 1:19; Rev. 5:9). Therefore, Christians must no longer pursue immorality.

Paul then gave a concluding command that sums up his entire argument about sexual purity: **“So glorify God with your body”** (“glorify God in your body, and in your spirit,” KJV; “honor God with your bodies,” NIV). We belong to God because we are redeemed by the blood of Christ; we owe Him everything. Our lives are to be directed toward pleasing God, not ourselves. He owns everything that we have. Therefore, we should surrender our bodies to His will and control.

Glorifying God with our bodies involves both negative and positive aspects. Negatively, we are to avoid sins such as immorality that would defy His revealed will. Positively, we are to joyfully obey the commands and will of God for our lives. Doing this not only honors God as the Lord but also serves as a positive testimony to others of His love and grace. When we honor God’s design for human sexuality, we demonstrate the glory of God in our lives. As Jesus once said to His disciples, “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matt. 5:16).

In this section of 1 Corinthians, we see Paul’s frustrations with the sexually immoral believers in the church at Corinth. Based on his frequent use of the phrase “don’t you know,” we conclude that Paul had previously instructed these believers in the principles of Christian morality. Their departure from his teachings revealed the sinful pull of a secular culture on spiritually immature believers. Christians today face many similar pressures and temptations. So-called philosophies of sexual liberation have saturated today’s culture with their demand for conformity to the insatiable appetites of the human body. Christians today need to take courage in the Lord and stand against the new morality of this age—which is really nothing more than the sexual immorality of past ages. Jesus prayed that His followers would be in the world but not of the world (John 17:14). Let us, then, surrender ourselves as believers to live each day for the glory of God!

## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Redeem, Redemption, Redeemer” on page 1339 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What is the Old Testament background of the concept of redemption? How can you as a Christian express gratitude to God for your redemption from sin?

# KEEPING COMMITMENTS

Believers honor God by keeping their vows related to marriage and purity.

God designed marriage to be a lifelong loving relationship between a man and a woman. As such, marriage is foundational for the family and, by extension, human society. The commitment between a man and a woman in marriage is intended to engender intimacy and exclusivity (Gen. 2:24). In order for marriage to function as God intended, a husband and wife must make and keep promises to God and each other. However, the marriage relationship suffered great harm following the sin of Adam and Eve. Trust and intimacy were replaced by distrust and blame. To this day millions of adults and children deal with the consequences of sin-shattered marriages.

Families today need encouragement to hold firmly to biblical commands related to marriage and sexual purity. We need to heed the instructions that Paul wrote long ago to the Corinthian church. Similar to our day, the Corinthians lived in a context in which sexual immorality was the norm, not the exception. In this session's Bible passage, Paul addressed questions the Corinthian believers asked regarding divorce and remarriage. His instructions provide biblical wisdom that we would do well to follow.

## UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

### 1 CORINTHIANS 7:1-40

In chapter 6, Paul confronted Christians in Corinth who minimized the seriousness of sexual sins. He established the principle that the believer's body belongs to Christ and is the temple of the Holy Spirit. He urged Christians to obey God's demand for purity before marriage and faithfulness to one's spouse in marriage. Paul expanded on those themes in chapter 7.

In 7:1-9, Paul addressed a question about the nature of sexual intimacy. Was human sexual desire God-given and, if so, how were Christians to handle that desire? Paul affirmed that sexual desire was a gift from God. Believers honor God by satisfying the gift of sexual desire only in the context of the marriage relationship. Thus, Paul encouraged husbands and wives to meet their mutual needs for intimacy and avoid pursuing sexual satisfaction outside the marriage relationship. He urged unmarried and widowed individuals to remain celibate. For Paul, singleness was an acceptable—and at times preferable—and God-given manner of life for some believers.

In 7:10-16, Paul urged couples that were married to remain married if possible. Spouses with marital problems should keep working toward reconciliation. In cases wherein one spouse was a believer and the other was an unbeliever, Paul urged the believing spouse to be a witness for Christ to the unbelieving spouse, reminding the believing spouse that an intact family benefits the children. However, the apostle acknowledged an exception to this counsel if an unbelieving spouse were simply to abandon the family.

Paul broadened his instruction in 7:17-24 by urging believers to find satisfaction in serving the Lord faithfully in their present life situations. He named circumcision and slavery as two examples. Paul's emphasis with this instruction was for believers to avoid getting distracted by secondary matters. What mattered most was keeping God's commands whatever the believer's situation in life.

In 7:25-40, Paul once again spoke of the choices of singleness and marriage. He commended those who married but also spoke of the advantages of serving Christ as a single. Paul urged each believer to find and pursue God's will in these important life choices.

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

### **MARRIAGE AND INTIMACY** (1 Cor. 7:1-7)

God established the institution of marriage in the garden of Eden before sin entered the world (Gen. 2:24). He designed the marriage relationship as the foundation of human procreation and community. The marriage bond thus calls for spouses to show sacrificial love and mutual respect to each other. It is the appropriate, God-designed context for sexual intimacy.

#### **VERSE 1**

**Now in response to the matters you wrote about: “It is good for a man not to use a woman for sex.”**

Paul indicated here that he was responding to the contents of a letter from the Corinthian church (**the matters you wrote about**). In 1 Corinthians 5:9, Paul mentioned that he had sent the church a previous letter (now lost) in which he instructed believers “not to associate with immoral people.” Some Bible scholars suggest that the Corinthians badly misinterpreted Paul’s instructions in that letter. They later sent the apostle a letter in return, asking for further guidance on some specific matters.

Most modern English Bible translations place quotation marks around the statement **It is good for a man not to use a woman for sex** (“It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman,” ESV, NIV). These translations do so to indicate that Paul likely quoted the statement from the Corinthians’ letter. Whether Paul originally made the statement while in Corinth or in his previous letter is unclear. In any case, he intended to clarify the Corinthians’ confusion regarding the matter of sexual relations.

The Greek phrase rendered *not to use a woman for sex* literally reads “not to touch a woman” (see KJV). Bible scholars agree that the phrase was an ancient Greek euphemism for sexual relations. The question, then, is whether the Corinthians had misunderstood Paul and concluded that not only unmarried Christians but also married couples needed to refrain from sexual relations. Evidently, some in the Corinthian church promoted an extremely ascetic lifestyle for believers. They believed that human desires were unspiritual and therefore needed to be rejected as much as possible. This included refraining from sexual relations in marriage, if not from marriage itself.

The Christian Standard Bible translation of the phrase emphasizes that men were never to use women for mere sexual gratification. As the subsequent verses show, Paul did not claim that either marriage or celibacy was more spiritual. Rather, he taught that marriage was the proper context for mutual sexual fulfillment. He wanted spouses to meet each other’s needs and protect each other from sexual temptation.

## VERSE 2

**But because sexual immorality is so common, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman should have sexual relations with her own husband.**

Ancient Corinth was a city where **sexual immorality** was **common**. People turned the city’s name into a verb, *to corinthianize*, that basically meant “to act immorally.” Thus, Paul knew that the believers in Corinth needed a clear scriptural understanding of marriage and sexual intimacy. Sexual desire was indeed a gift from God; yet, for wise and beneficial reasons God confined sexual intimacy within the marriage bond. Husbands were to have sexual

relations only with their own wives, and wives with their own husbands. Sexual immorality in its many forms—whether prostitution, adultery, fornication, pornography, or the like—corrodes and eventually destroys the sacred marriage bond. Christian husbands and wives needed to protect their marriages as they would guard a priceless treasure.

#### VERSES 3-4

**A husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise a wife to her husband. A wife does not have the right over her own body, but her husband does. In the same way, a husband does not have the right over his own body, but his wife does.**

Having established that sexual intimacy was properly confined to the marriage relationship, Paul addressed the related question of sexual relations within marriage. He may have had in mind those in Corinth who believed that to be spiritual even married couples needed to reject their sexual desires. Paul rejected that view on the grounds that Christian marriage came with a mutual obligation for spouses to love each other and seek to meet each other's needs, including the need of sexual fulfillment.

We should not interpret the phrase **marital duty** (“render ... due benevolence,” KJV; “give ... conjugal rights,” ESV) as a negative, as something to be done with dread or boredom. Paul emphasized that marriage calls for the passionate love and care of one's spouse. God left no room in marriage for selfishness or personal gratification by one spouse at the expense of the other.

Most people in the first century AD would readily have accepted Paul's assertion that **a husband** has **the right** (“power,” KJV; “authority,” ESV, NIV) over his wife's body. They would have been stunned, however, to hear that **a wife** likewise had *the right* over her husband's body. Paul understood that the gospel elevates the marriage relationship back to its God-designed, mutual partnership. Husbands provide loving spiritual leadership to their families by exemplifying the self-giving model of Christ and His body, the church (Eph. 5:25). In turn, wives show deep respect for their husbands and submit to their spiritual leadership. Both husbands and wives commit themselves to meet the needs of their spouses in mutual love. In doing so, they demonstrate the essence of Christian humility (Phil. 2:3-4).

#### VERSE 5

**Do not deprive one another — except when you agree for a time, to devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again; otherwise, Satan may tempt you because of your lack of self-control.**

Paul commanded the Corinthian believers to reject the common view in Corinth that sexual immorality was OK. He drew them back to God's original design in creation: the marriage bond is the only wise and proper context for sexual intimacy. Husbands and wives commit themselves to each another in an exclusive, loving relationship that meets mutual needs, including the fulfillment of sexual desire. Consequently, Paul counseled Christian spouses not to **deprive one another** of sexual intimacy. Withholding sexual relations as a form of punishment or emotional manipulation violated the commitment of mutual love between a husband and wife, and it potentially created temptations for one or both to engage in sexual immorality.

Paul went on to affirm an exception to the rule of Christian spouses not depriving each other. A couple might mutually **agree** ("with consent," KJV) to a temporary period (**for a time**) of sexual abstinence for the purpose of devotion **to prayer**. The apostle probably envisioned a situation in which one or both spouses faced a personal crisis or deep need and wanted to cry out to God with prayer and fasting. Just as a believer might refrain from eating for a limited time to focus on spiritual needs, a married Christian might also abstain from having sexual relations for a time of intense prayer.

Paul further counseled Christian couples not to extend their times of abstinence too long or unilaterally. He was concerned that **Satan** might take advantage of the abstaining couple, tempting one or both spouses to cast off their **self-control** and commit sexual immorality. To avoid such temptation, couples should **come together again** as soon as possible.

## VERSE 6

### **I say this as a concession, not as a command.**

Bible scholars have debated whether this brief verse relates primarily to what Paul said in verse 5 or verse 7. If it relates to verse 5—the view I prefer—Paul clarified that he was not commanding Christian couples to have temporary periods of sexual abstinence. He simply conceded that a time of spiritual crisis might call for such a temporary abstinence for the purpose of prayer. If verse 6 relates more what follows it, Paul declared up front that his own practice of celibacy should not be taken as a directive for all believers.

## VERSE 7

### **I wish that all people were as I am. But each has his own gift from God, one person has this gift, another has that.**

When Paul wished that **all people were** as he was, he may have been referring to his status as an unmarried adult. We know little about Paul's marital status despite his extensive writings in the New Testament. Some Bible scholars

suggest that he had been married earlier in his life. As a zealous Pharisee, Paul would have adhered to the expectations in the Mishnah (a compilation of Jewish oral traditions) that Jewish rabbis be married. These scholars further speculate that by the time Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, his wife had died or had divorced him after he became a follower of Christ.

Whether or not Paul's wish referred to marital status, at the least it referred to a God-given capacity to keep one's sexual desire under control. He used the Greek word rendered **gift** later in 12:4 in reference to a variety of powerful manifestations of the Spirit in and through believers for the purpose of strengthening the church. In 7:7, Paul seems to have included among the Spirit's gifts the capacity to live as a sexually pure adult.

With the words **but each has his own gift from God, one person has this gift, another has that** the apostle affirmed that God expects sexual purity from both married and unmarried believers. For the married, the *gift* involves faithfulness to one's spouse and lovingly meeting each other's needs. For widowed and never married adults, it involves consistent self-control through abstinence. Both groups can serve the Lord effectively and honor Him through the gifts He has given them.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Marriage" (pp. 1059–1061) in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What are the predominant views in today's culture about marriage and sexuality? According to verses 1-7, what human needs are uniquely met in a faithful, biblically informed marriage relationship?

## MARRIAGE AND SINGLENESS (1 Cor. 7:8-9)

In this section, Paul continued to counsel Christians regarding marriage and celibacy. While the decision to marry or remain single calls for much wisdom, one factor to be considered is a person's level of self-control.

### VERSE 8

**I say to the unmarried and to widows: It is good for them if they remain as I am.**

The word rendered **unmarried** literally means "not [presently] married" and could include adults who had never married as well as those who were divorced. Some Bible scholars suggest that since the Greek term is masculine,

it may have referred to widowed men as a counterpart to Paul's specific mention of **widows**. Whatever the group or groups intended, Paul regarded himself as one of *the unmarried*, and he recommended they remain single.

We should keep in mind at this point some cultural factors regarding widowhood that characterized first-century Corinth. Men and women who lost a spouse to death were expected to marry again as soon as possible. Reasons included property acquisition issues, desired number of children (at least three), higher social status, and low life expectancy, especially among women. These expectations meant that Paul's counsel to remain single went against popular thought in Corinth's Greco-Roman culture.

Why, then, did the apostle advocate for the unmarried to remain single? In 7:26, he referred to "the present distress" as one reason those who had never married might consider remaining single. While we cannot be certain about the precise nature of the stressful situation, Paul cautioned that getting married at that time would add hardships to an already difficult situation. Later, in 7:32-35, he further suggested that an unmarried Christian might have opportunities to serve the Lord in ways that a married believer could not because of proper family obligations.

## VERSE 9

**But if they do not have self-control, they should marry, since it is better to marry than to burn with desire.**

Paul warned that remaining single did not provide an excuse for sexual immorality. Those who remained single needed to be sure they were spiritually mature and could exercise **self-control** over their sexual desires. (In Gal. 5:22-23, Paul listed self-control as part of the "fruit of the Spirit.") That meant avoiding sexual immorality by remaining abstinent (1 Cor. 6:18).

Paul encouraged those who could not remain abstinent to pursue marriage with God's blessing. He acknowledged that different believers had different gifts from God that led appropriately to either marriage or celibacy. The phrase **to burn with desire** literally is "to burn." While some Bible students have suggested that Paul warned about hell as a consequence of sexual immorality, the more likely meaning in this context is uncontrolled sexual desire.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

What subtle cultural pressures do unmarried adults in your church congregation face today? What are some practical ways your church ministers to single adults? Married adults?

## MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE (1 Cor. 7:10-13)

In this section of verses, Paul addressed the matters of divorce and marriage to a non-Christian spouse. In doing so, he affirmed that some of his counsel was based on clear scriptural commands while other counsel was his Spirit-given wisdom for a particular situation.

### VERSES 10-11

**To the married I give this command—not I, but the Lord—a wife is not to leave her husband. But if she does leave, she must remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband—and a husband is not to divorce his wife.**

In first-century Judaism, a married man had legal authority to divorce his wife if she became “displeasing to him because he [found] something indecent about her” (Deut. 24:1). Predictably, influential Jewish teachers of Paul’s time touted differing views about the meaning of the words “something indecent.” Rabbi Hillel taught that a man could rightfully divorce his wife for failing to prepare food properly. Another teacher, Rabbi Shammai, limited the grounds for divorce to adultery—a view that comes closest to Jesus’ teaching about divorce and remarriage in Matthew 19:9.

In the Greco-Roman culture that dominated first-century Corinth, long-term marriages were the exception rather than the rule. Either a husband or a wife could enact a divorce simply by abandoning one’s spouse. The church in Corinth needed guidance on several questions related to this issue: Was it permissible for a Christian couple to divorce for any reason? Could (or should) a recently converted wife or husband leave a spouse who refused to believe in Christ? What if the unbelieving spouse initiated the divorce by leaving? Paul began his response to these questions by reminding the Corinthians of God’s original design and command regarding marriage.

The phrase **to the married** probably refers specifically to Christian couples. In such cases, God’s original design for marriage was clear: **a wife is not to leave her husband** and **a husband is not to divorce his wife**. Christ had reminded some Pharisees of this divine command when they sought to test Him with a question about divorce. He quoted Genesis 2:24 to them and then commanded, “Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate” (Matt. 19:6). Paul thus based his **command** to the married not on his opinion but on God’s Word (**not I, but the Lord**). The Greek verb rendered *to leave* in 1 Corinthians 7:10 means “to divorce,” as the parallel phrase in verse 11 makes clear.

Is God’s wish ever for a Christian couple to divorce? I don’t believe so. God designed marriage to be a lifelong relationship between a husband and wife.

Do Christian couples ever divorce? Sadly, yes. Paul acknowledged that fact when he wrote the words **but if she does leave**. At this point the apostle may have spoken about a real-life situation in the Corinthian church without naming any names. He counseled the estranged wife to **remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband**. Paul hoped that in time the couple would work through their difficulties and agree to restore their marriage.

In line, therefore, with God's design for marriage, Paul commanded Christian couples to acknowledge Christ as Lord of their lives and marriages. He wanted them to know they were not free to do whatever the worldly culture allowed or promoted. They belonged to Christ, and their marriages as believers were designed to be portraits of Christ's unending relationship with the church (Eph. 5:31-32).

### VERSES 12-13

**But I (not the Lord) say to the rest: If any brother has an unbelieving wife and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. Also, if any woman has an unbelieving husband and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce her husband.**

Here Paul addressed a second scenario in which divorce might occur: the marriage of a believer and an unbeliever. Paul's successful evangelism efforts in Corinth (see Acts 18:8) probably had resulted in some situations in which one spouse believed in Christ but the other did not. Both Jewish and Gentile cultures stressed the importance of agreement in marriages regarding religious convictions. There was a precedent in Old Testament history for God's people to put away (divorce) non-Israelite spouses (see Ezra 10:3). Perhaps, then, Paul was aware that some of the married Corinthian believers wondered if they should divorce their unbelieving spouses for that reason.

The words **but I (not the Lord)** do not mean that Paul discounted the spiritual authority of the counsel he was about to give. Rather, he simply acknowledged that Christ had not taught directly about the matter. Paul assumed that God's original design for marriage applied even in marriages involving a believer and an unbeliever. That is, the believing spouse **must not** enact a **divorce** if the unbelieving spouse desires to continue the marriage and **is willing to live with** a believer.

Paul went on in 7:14-16 to state that if the unbelieving spouse refused to continue in the marriage, the believing spouse could accept the divorce and was "not bound in such cases" (7:15). In cases in which the unbelieving spouse remained in the marriage, however, Paul reminded believing spouses that they could have a great spiritual influence on their unbelieving mates. In addition, they could influence their children for Christ.

In concluding this session, we need to acknowledge that evangelical, Bible-believing Christians hold varying views regarding the matters of divorce and marriage after divorce. In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul dealt with specific questions arising in the cultural context of first-century Corinth. He did not present a comprehensive theological treatment on Christian marriage and divorce. Further, in light of the ease and frequency of divorce in today's culture, we need to think holistically from the totality of Scripture to hear God's message to us today.

For example, all evangelical Christians surely would agree that Scripture does not require any Christian wife to remain in a situation of physical abuse against her (and children) by a violent spouse. The wife's safety and well-being requires separation in such cases; there is no obligation for the abused wife to remain in danger. Paul taught in Romans 13:1-4 that God established and authorized human governments to protect those who seek to obey the law from those who would harm them.

On the other hand, there seems to be no consensus in the church, even among conservative Bible expositors, regarding biblical grounds for divorce and marriage after divorce. Some contend that believers who get a divorce must remain unmarried. Others hold that, based on Jesus' statements in Matthew 19:9, when a Christian couple divorces because one spouse commits adultery, the abandoned spouse may marry again. Still others allow for marriage again if a believing spouse is deserted and divorced by an unbelieving spouse. In light of these differing views, we should hold our personal convictions on these matters with humility.

Let us agree that because God designed the marriage relationship for the good of human beings, we as followers of Christ need to always honor marriage and seek to establish and preserve Christian marriages as often as we can. Our secular culture seeks to redefine marriage and in the process mocks God's intention in creation. We are wise as Christians to demonstrate our commitment to God through the maintenance of our marriages. Let us provide a holy alternative to the rejection of biblical marriage in our culture.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Divorce" on pages 434–435 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. Do you agree or disagree with the statement "God did not intend for divorce to occur"? How can churches best minister to families that experience divorce? What more would you like to see your church do to strengthen families?

# INFLUENCING FOR CHRIST

Believers represent God by using their influence to bring others to Him.

In my early years as a pastor, I took part in a mission trip to eastern Romania. Our group went there to encourage a group of believers and to conduct evangelistic meetings in two cities. Before we went, trainers instructed us regarding some of the local social customs we would encounter, including preferred styles of dress and music.

Years later, a missions leader asked me to participate in another overseas gospel outreach effort—this time to share the gospel with Muslims who were living or vacationing in London. Part of our preparation for the trip involved learning some key Arabic words and phrases as well as becoming familiar with distinctive customs of Muslim culture. During our time in London we were able to give out Arabic New Testaments and copies of an Arabic-language evangelistic film to all who would accept them.

On both of these mission trips, we utilized the same approach Paul used centuries earlier on his missionary journeys. He adapted to various cultural expectations as needed in order to gain a hearing for the gospel. He never compromised the gospel message or acted in unchristian ways. As he stated in 1 Corinthians 9:22, “I have become all things to all people, so that I may by every possible means save some.”

## UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

### 1 CORINTHIANS 8:1–11:1

In 1 Corinthians 8, Paul moved to a new concern for the Corinthian believers: Christian freedom. First, he addressed the question of whether Christians were free to eat food that had been used in pagan worship rites before being sold

in the marketplace (8:1-13). For Paul, the answer depended on the believer's spiritual understanding and circumstances. If a Christian understood that idols were not real deities and that all food ultimately comes from the one true God and His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, then the believer could eat the food in question in good conscience. If, however, the person knew that eating the food would offend the conscience of some other believer present at the meal, then the Christian should refrain as a way of demonstrating Christian love.

In chapter 9 Paul went on to describe how he balanced the principles of Christian freedom and self-giving service in his ministry as an apostle. As an apostle of Christ to the Gentiles, Paul enjoyed the same rights as other apostles, including the right to receive material support from those to whom he gave spiritual service (9:1-7). Although this right was based on Scripture, Paul had willingly refused such compensation from the Corinthians so as not to hinder their acceptance of the gospel (9:8-14). He did not preach the gospel for money but rather in passionate obedience to his calling (9:15-18). Further, he freely and humbly adapted to the cultural sensitivities of those he sought to win to faith in Christ (9:19-23). Similar to an athlete in training, Paul practiced the discipline of self-control to excel in spiritual service, fulfill his calling, and receive an imperishable crown (9:24-27).

In 1 Corinthians 10:1–11:1, Paul warned the Corinthians not to misuse their freedom in Christ by engaging in the sinful ways of their worldly culture. He cited the scriptural example of God's punishment of the liberated Israelites who faltered during their wilderness journey by engaging in idolatry and sexual immorality (10:1-13). Paul urged the Corinthians to flee from idolatry so that they would not likewise provoke the Lord's wrath (10:14-22). He also urged them to follow his example with regard to Christian freedom. In other words, they should always do what builds up others and brings glory to God before insisting on personal rights (10:23–11:1).

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

### WALKING IN THEIR SHOES (1 Cor. 9:19-23)

In this section of verses, Paul explained why he did not insist on certain rights that he possessed as an apostle of Christ. He was motivated by a greater desire: sharing in the blessings of the gospel as people received salvation.

#### VERSE 19

**Although I am free from all and not anyone's slave, I have made myself a slave to everyone, in order to win more people.**

People in Paul's day sometimes used the contrasting terms *free* and *slave* to speak of all humanity—that is, everyone fell into one of these two categories (see 1 Cor. 12:13; Eph. 6:8). A free person's status in society, for obvious reasons, was superior to that of a slave. Slaves welcomed the prospect of becoming free, but no free person yearned to become a slave.

Paul affirmed that in political terms he was **free from all and not anyone's slave**. He claimed the rights of Roman citizenship from birth (Acts 22:27-28). In terms of his gospel calling, however, Paul adopted an attitude of willing servitude over personal freedom. He **made himself a slave to everyone** ("servant unto all," KJV) in imitation of the Lord Jesus Christ, who taught that He had come into the world not to be served but to serve and "give his life as a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28).

Paul exhibited the basic qualities of a servant leader, using his rights, authority, and influence for the benefit of people with no rights, authority, or influence. The servant leader willingly rejects opportunities for personal gain to provide greater opportunities for others to benefit. Thus, Paul adopted a servant attitude **in order to win more people** to faith in Christ. That attitude stands in stark contrast to the all too common leadership model of lording it over others for selfish gain (see Mark 10:42-45).

A passion to see lost people be saved fueled Paul's ministry as an apostle. He knew that his free status and gospel calling included having certain rights and benefits. However, he willingly put aside those rights and benefits for the sake of focusing people's hearts on Christ as Savior and Lord. He would rather gain souls for God's kingdom than build his own earthly kingdom. Christ had called Paul to present the gospel to lost people and build up the church. He avoided all potential hindrances to that calling.

## VERSE 20

**To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win Jews; to those under the law, like one under the law—though I myself am not under the law—to win those under the law.**

In 9:20-22, Paul described three categories of people he accommodated in his evangelistic pursuits. First, he **became like a Jew** in his efforts **to win Jews** to Christ. This statement might seem strange at first, since Paul was a Jew by birth. Why would he need to become *like a Jew*?

Paul did not renounce his Jewish heritage when he became a follower of Christ (see Phil. 3:4-6). Nevertheless, the statement here points to the profound deliverance from self-righteousness (works salvation) that he experienced upon his conversion. To become *like a Jew* meant that Paul continued to participate on occasion in various Jewish traditions and

ceremonies (see Acts 20:16; 21:20-26) so as not to offend Jews and thereby miss a chance to tell them about Jesus the Messiah. He also did not go out of his way to disparage **the law** of Moses, which was central to Jewish religious sensibilities. Certainly Paul had come to understand that no one can be saved by keeping the law. The law's purpose was to show us that we are all helpless sinners who need a Savior (see Rom. 3:20; Gal. 3:21-22). Yet, Paul convinced his coworker Timothy (whose mother was Jewish) to be circumcised so there would be no hindrance to their evangelistic work among Jews in the region around Timothy's hometown. Paul sought to be sensitive to the cultural expectations of Jews and Gentile proselytes to Judaism while never compromising the gospel of freedom in Christ.

## VERSE 21

**To those who are without the law, like one without the law—  
though I am not without God's law but under the law of Christ—  
to win those without the law.**

Paul then described a second group he accommodated: **those who are without the law** ("outside the law," ESV; "not having the law," NIV). These were Gentiles who had no knowledge of, appreciation for, or commitment to the Mosaic law as a covenant with the God of Israel.

Paul's statement that he became **like one without the law** did not mean that he joined in doing wicked things. Rather, it meant that he explained the gospel to Gentiles in terms they could understand. For example, he spoke with Greek philosophers in Athens about the one true God and the way of salvation without directly mentioning the Old Testament Scriptures. Instead, he sincerely commended the Athenians' spiritual interest, made an object lesson of their altar dedicated to an unknown God, and quoted a Greek poet. By doing so, Paul was able then to tell them about the one true Creator and call them to repentance and faith in the resurrected Lord (Acts 17:22-31).

Paul clarified his relationship to the law. He wanted the Corinthian believers to know that he did not reject the value and purpose of **God's law** or his accountability under it. In fact, he gladly placed himself **under the law of Christ**, which Jesus had summarized in two great commands: love God with all your being and love your neighbor as yourself (see Matt 22:36-40). Paul never compromised God's moral demands to fit in with a Gentile audience.

We as believers need to be motivated by Paul's example today. We will never win others to genuine faith in Christ by joining in sinful behavior. We can establish friendships through appropriate common interests that give us opportunities to share the gospel. However, it will be our transformed lives and true testimony that points others to the only One who can save them.

## VERSE 22

**To the weak I became weak, in order to win the weak. I have become all things to all people, so that I may by every possible means save some.**

Paul described the third group of people he accommodated as **the weak**. Bible scholars have debated whether this description refers to immature believers or to unbelievers with spiritual interest but little social standing. Those who hold the latter view point to Paul's concluding words in this verse that he wanted as many as possible to be saved. These scholars also point to passages such as 1 Corinthians 1:26-27, where Paul used the term *weak* in reference to the poor social status of many Corinthians when they became believers. That is, God chose to call to salvation "what is weak in the world to shame the strong" (1:27).

Other scholars point to 8:7-13 as the more likely background for what Paul meant in 9:22. That is, some believers had a weak conscience regarding matters such as eating food that had been used in sacrifices at pagan temples. Paul urged mature Christians to follow his example in voluntarily refraining from eating temple food in situations where doing so would disturb the faith of weaker believers. This view accords best with the apostle's overall theme of limiting personal freedoms for the sake of others. Indeed, Paul stated that he would go so far as to "never again eat meat" in order to avoid causing a Christian "brother or sister to fall" (8:13).

Paul summarized his course of conduct toward **all people** in the second half of 9:22. He was willing to do—or not do—whatever he could in order to see people come to faith in Jesus Christ. Again, Paul's approach did not involve compromising the gospel message or engaging in immoral behavior. He was more than willing, however, to limit his personal freedoms and customize evangelistic and mission strategies for different groups of people.

The words **save some** remind us that not everyone who hears the gospel will respond with belief. However, Paul did not let that reality hinder him from using **every possible means** to win as many as possible to faith in Jesus Christ. May we follow his example in our evangelistic efforts!

## VERSE 23

**Now I do all this because of the gospel, so that I may share in the blessings.**

What motivated Paul to limit his personal freedoms and accommodate various groups of people in his ministry? **The gospel**. Proclaiming the gospel to lost people was not merely one item on a weekly checklist for Paul. It was

the organizing purpose of his life in Christ. Everything Paul did centered around Christ and the mission Christ gave him to be an ambassador of the gospel. To **share in the blessings** (“be partakers thereof with you,” KJV) of the gospel could mean either that Paul looked forward to his reward for faithfulness in preaching the gospel or that he enjoyed the same benefits of salvation experienced by those he won to faith in Christ.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

What are some groups in your community that have different backgrounds or cultural traditions from yours? What would you be willing to do if it meant gaining an opportunity to share the gospel with these groups? In what ways are you blessed by seeing people come to faith in Christ?

## RUNNING IN THE RACE (1 Cor. 9:24-27)

Paul continued his emphasis on doing whatever was required to faithfully fulfill his gospel calling. He illustrated his point with an analogy of athletes.

### VERSE 24

**Don't you know that the runners in a stadium all race, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way to win the prize.**

Ancient Corinth hosted the Isthmian Games, second only to the Olympic Games in fame and attendance. The Isthmian Games were held in honor of Poseidon, the Greek god of the sea. Competitions for male athletes included chariot and foot races, wrestling, and boxing. Women could compete alongside men in the areas of music and poetry.

Paul undoubtedly knew about the Isthmian Games and may have attended the games during his eighteen-month stay in Corinth. Generally speaking, however, first-century Judaism frowned on athletic competition, and pious Jews avoided fraternizing with Gentiles, especially in settings where athletes exercised little physical modesty. Paul might have made an exception in Corinth based on the principles of accommodation mentioned previously.

In any case, Paul knew that the Corinthian believers would be familiar with competitive foot races and could glean spiritual truth from the analogy. Thus, he depicted a group of **runners in a stadium** racing hard toward the finish line. **Only one** of the runners would finish first and receive **the prize**. In a similar way, believers needed to have the same passion and drive to live **in such a way to win the prize** of Christ's “well done.”

We need to apply Paul's analogy to the Christian life with caution. He was not implying that Christians are somehow in competition with one another for salvation or that only one believer would win that prize. His point, rather, was that if athletes discipline their bodies and strive with all of their might to win a foot race, how much more should believers strive with all their strength in pursuing God's will for their lives (see Phil. 3:12-15).

Our power to live the Christian life comes from the Holy Spirit (Eph. 5:18). Living in step with the Spirit demands that we pursue spiritual disciplines such as studying God's Word, praying, and resisting temptation. Paul's encouragement to the Corinthians and his own practice of spiritual disciplines were aimed at defeating the world, the flesh, and the devil. He was single-minded in his focus on fulfilling the calling set for him by Jesus Christ.

## VERSE 25

**Now everyone who competes exercises self-control in everything. They do it to receive a perishable crown, but we an imperishable crown.**

Athletes competing at the level of the Isthmian Games trained for years before the competition to perfect their techniques and hone their physical skills. They maintained a healthy diet, exercised strenuously, and practiced, practiced, practiced. The Greek verb rendered **competes** literally means "to strive." We get our English verb *to agonize* from the Greek root word. Athletes committed themselves to a strenuous daily regimen and great personal sacrifice. They exercised **self-control in everything**. And they did all of this, Paul declared, **to receive a perishable crown**.

Today's Olympic athletes compete for the top prize of a gold medal. Champions of the Isthmian Games in Paul's day received a ceremonial wreath-crown made of either dried celery sprouts or pine sprigs. Then as now, victory may have garnered other rewards too, including fame and fortune. Paul's point, however, was that the main prize for those athletes who worked so long and hard would quickly wilt and fade away.

In Galatians 5:22-23, Paul listed *self-control* as one of nine spiritual qualities the Holy Spirit produces in maturing believers. While self-control for an athlete might involve using human will to avoid physically unhealthy activities or diet, the believer is able to exercise self-control over sinful desires by submitting to the Holy Spirit. The Spirit empowers faithful Christians to resist the devil and live victoriously for Christ the Lord (see Jas. 4:7). Moreover, the believer's reward for living a victorious Christian life is **imperishable** ("incorruptible," KJV; "last forever," NIV). This is not the crown of life that will be given to all of the saved in heaven but rather

the rewards that will be given to believers based on their stewardship in the Christian life (see 1 Cor. 3:10-15).

#### VERSE 26

### **So I do not run like one who runs aimlessly or box like one beating the air.**

Paul's use of the first-person singular in 9:26-27 emphasizes that he practiced what he preached to the Corinthian believers. He knew what Christ had called him to do with the remainder of his life, and he would not lose that focus and discipline. The phrase **one who runs aimlessly** depicts a runner who veers off course during a race either from distraction or discouragement. Similarly, the phrase **box like one beating the air** can refer to shadow boxing an imaginary opponent or failing to land any blows against an actual opponent. Paul had committed himself to making every moment and every effort count in the Christian life. He was concerned that some of the Corinthian believers had lost their purpose and focus because of their undisciplined lives.

#### VERSE 27

### **Instead, I discipline my body and bring it under strict control, so that after preaching to others, I myself will not be disqualified.**

Paul made it clear that he was not competing against other apostles in his calling. Rather, he was competing—like every believer—against the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil. Therefore, he strove to **discipline** (“keep under,” KJV; “strike a blow to,” NIV) his physical **body** and **bring it under strict control** (“make it my slave,” NIV). The believer's primary obstacle to success in the Christian life is an undisciplined lifestyle that yields to the desires of the sinful nature.

Paul did not have one standard for himself and a different one for others. He knew it was important for him to practice what he preached. The words **be disqualified** do not refer to a loss of salvation but rather to a loss of purpose, usefulness, and reward for faithfulness.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Self-Control” on page 1428 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. Why is the power of the Holy Spirit necessary for successful self-control? What are some of the benefits of self-control experienced by mature believers?

## FOLLOWING OUR LEADER (1 Cor. 10:31-33; 11:1)

Sexual immorality and idolatry were twin features in many of Corinth's pagan religions. Paul knew that believers in the city who had come out of those religions often battled the temptation to fall back into one or both sins. Christians needed to follow Paul's example of keeping their eyes on Jesus and their wills under the Spirit's control.

### VERSE 31

**So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God.**

In 1 Corinthians 10:23-30, Paul returned to the issue of behavior that might be permissible for Christians, yet not beneficial (see 6:12). He clearly warned believers not to engage in idol worship (10:14), but the question of whether it was OK for Christians to buy and eat food that had been previously used in pagan sacrifices did not have a cut-and-dry answer. For those believers who knew that all food was from God and idols were not really gods, the answer might be yes—unless, that is, the believers knew their actions might hinder the faith of a less mature Christian. Then the answer was to willingly refrain from eating food that came from the pagan temples.

Paul summed up his guiding principle for all situations in 10:31. He urged believers to **do everything for the glory of God**. He wanted Christians to evaluate every aspect of their lives in light of whether their actions honored or dishonored the Lord. Because the gospel transforms our hearts to please the Lord and not ourselves, our actions should follow. Thus, we are to be willing to limit our freedoms for God's glory and the spiritual benefit of others.

### VERSE 32

**Give no offense to Jews or Greeks or the church of God,**

Paul commanded believers to **give no offense** to other people. There are times, of course, when Christians might offend others unintentionally or through no fault of their own. Paul had in mind that believers ought never to willfully or knowingly put a stumbling block before someone else that might hinder the person's salvation or spiritual growth. The phrase **Jews or Greeks** refers to unbelieving Jews and Gentiles. Paul's admonition points back to the principle of being sensitive to Jewish and Gentile cultural traditions when those traditions did not impinge on the truth of the gospel (see 9:20-21).

The phrase **the church of God** refers to believers; it may correspond in particular to those Christians Paul earlier described as having weak consciences in matters such as eating food from the pagan temples

(see 8:7-11). Christians who had no qualms about eating such food still needed to refrain from doing so if they knew the action would offend a fellow believer. Limiting one's freedom demonstrated Christlike love.

### VERSE 33

**just as I also try to please everyone in everything, not seeking my own benefit, but the benefit of many, so that they may be saved.**

Paul's declaration that he tried **to please everyone in everything** needs to be understood in the same way as his declaration in 9:22 that he became "all things to all people" (9:22). Paul never compromised scriptural truth or a holy lifestyle just to fit in with people. He did not act selfishly but always for **the benefit of many, so that they may be saved.**

### CHAPTER 11, VERSE 1

**Imitate me, as I also imitate Christ.**

Most modern English Bibles include this verse with the final paragraph of chapter 10. The verse completes Paul's emphasis in 10:31-33 on doing everything for God's glory and the benefit of others.

Paul urged the Corinthian believers to **imitate** ("follow," KJV; "follow my example," NIV) him as he sought to faithfully **imitate Christ**. This statement doesn't mean Paul wanted personal glory. Rather, he wanted other Christians to join him in living Christlike lives. Christ set the ultimate example of self-denial for the benefit of others: He gave His life on the cross so that those who believe in Him might have forgiveness and eternal life. Thinking, speaking, and acting like Jesus should be every believer's passion. His priorities should be our priorities. The top priority of Jesus was to do the will of God (Mark 3:35); His unswerving mission was to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10).

## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Stumbling Block" on page 1509 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What are some types of stumbling blocks today that might hinder unbelievers from coming to know Christ as Savior? When have you seen a believer limit his or her Christian freedom to benefit or encourage another believer? What do you need to change in your attitudes or behavior to fulfill the principle of doing everything for God's glory?

# CHRIST RESURRECTED

Believers find assurance for this life and the life to come through the resurrected Lord.

Every so often we read or hear about accounts of a phenomenon known today as “near-death experience.” In these accounts, people who clinically die—heartbeat and breathing stop—revive minutes later and live to tell an amazing story. They report experiences such as hovering briefly above their expired bodies and seeing the people gathered around them. They tell about hearing voices, seeing a brilliant, inviting light, and encountering deceased family members. Some speak of seeing and hearing Jesus or an angel of God who instructs them to return to their bodies.

Needless to say, when these amazing stories go public they spark both conversation and controversy. Some medical researchers accept the fact that a person might clinically die and then revive after a few minutes. However, they contend that reports of sights, sounds, emotions, and encounters are best explained as a victim’s continuing brain activity similar to a dream state.

Other people, including some Christians, take seriously the firsthand, eyewitness testimonies of the individuals who have these near-death experiences. Some believers go as far as to declare that such experiences are incontrovertible proof of life after death. Other Christians affirm the scriptural teaching about the life to come but question whether these accounts of near-death experiences match with biblical descriptions of the afterlife.

Those who seek assurance about life after death need look no further than the truth revealed in God’s Word and in the historic reality of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. In this session that focuses on the resurrection, we will examine the eyewitness testimony of this event from John’s Gospel. We will also include Paul’s teachings in 1 Corinthians 15 regarding the resurrection of Jesus and the resurrection of believers. The testimony of the Scriptures and the reality of the risen Christ are all we need to assure us of God’s promise of the believer’s future bodily resurrection.

# UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

## JOHN 19–20; 1 CORINTHIANS 15:1-58

At the conclusion of John 18, the Gospel writer described Pilate's unsuccessful effort to release Jesus. The clamoring crowd in Jerusalem demanded Jesus' crucifixion. In John 19:1-15, Pilate admitted that he had no legitimate reason to crucify Jesus. Nevertheless, he gave in to the mob's demand after the Jewish religious leaders threatened to report Pilate to Rome.

In John 19:16-30, the Gospel writer described Jesus' crucifixion. He told about the sign on the cross declaring Jesus to be the King of the Jews. He reported that soldiers gambled for Jesus' robe and recorded Jesus' tender charge for the apostle John to take care of Mary, Jesus' mother. Then he described Jesus' cry of thirst followed soon after by death.

In John 19:31-42, we learn that Jesus' death was confirmed when soldiers pierced His side with a spear. Two men, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, removed Jesus' body from the cross and prepared it for burial. They placed Jesus' body in a nearby garden tomb that Joseph owned.

John 20:1-18 describes Mary Magdalene's discovery of the empty tomb. She immediately reported this news to the disciples Peter and John. These two men ran to the tomb where Jesus' body had been placed and saw for themselves that the tomb was empty. After they left, Mary Magdalene encountered the risen Christ, who identified Himself to her. She then went immediately to tell all of the disciples the amazing news: Jesus had risen from the dead!

In John 20:19-31, Jesus made two post-resurrection appearances to His disciples. In the first appearance, He showed His followers the wounds on His body and then commissioned them to take the gospel to the world through the power of the Holy Spirit. In the second appearance, Jesus proved to Thomas, who was absent during the first appearance, that He had indeed risen from the dead.

In 1 Corinthians 15:1-19, Paul declared that the resurrection of Jesus was an essential component of the gospel. Paul taught that without the resurrection of Jesus, Christian faith would be an empty, baseless hope.

In 1 Corinthians 15:20-58, Paul provided a series of arguments that demonstrated the necessity of the resurrection. He declared Jesus to be the firstfruits of believers who had died but would be resurrected in the future. Paul contrasted the legacy of death through Adam and the legacy of life in Christ for believers. Paul revealed that Jesus would provide a spiritual body for believers when He returned. Those who are saved will receive their resurrection bodies at His second coming.

# EXPLORE THE TEXT

## **BELIEVING IN THE RESURRECTION** (John 20:3-9)

All four Gospels mention Mary Magdalene as one of the women who first found the empty tomb. John's Gospel describes Mary's initial visit alone to the tomb before sunrise (20:1). Finding the stone rolled away from the entrance, she ran and told Peter and John about her fear that someone had removed Jesus' body.

### **VERSES 3-4**

**At that, Peter and the other disciple went out, heading for the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and got to the tomb first.**

On hearing Mary Magdalene's report about the tomb, **Peter and the other disciple** went immediately to see it for themselves. Most Bible scholars believe that the phrase *the other disciple* refers to John, the son of Zebedee and writer of this Gospel. John typically referred to himself in his Gospel account with a descriptive phrase rather than by name (see John 13:23; 18:15-16; 21:7).

Simon Peter and John were among Jesus' first disciples. Both men made their living as fishermen, and both had brothers who also became Jesus' disciples (Mark 1:16-20). Peter and John, along with John's brother James, constituted a kind of inner circle whose companionship Jesus desired at several critical times (Mark 5:37; 9:2; 14:32-33). At places in John's Gospel, Peter and John appear to be set in contrast, showing that both disciples eventually became recognized leaders in the early church. That tension may be evident in John 20:4, where the Gospel writer noted that both men started out by **running together** but that **the other disciple** (John) **outran Peter and got to the tomb first**.

The greater point made in 20:3-4, however, is that both men reacted immediately to Mary's report and ran to inspect the burial site. Although Jesus had foretold His resurrection on the third day, Peter and John did not yet consider that possibility. They would need further proof.

### **VERSE 5**

**Stooping down, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in.**

The increasing light of dawn allowed John to see inside the tomb where Jesus' body had been placed. He did not see a body but noticed the **linen**

**cloths** that had been used to encase Jesus' body. John no doubt was puzzled about the scene. If some people had taken the body in the night for either good or bad reasons, surely they would not have removed the wrappings. In any case, John chose not to enter the tomb but to wait for Peter to arrive.

#### VERSES 6-7

**Then, following him, Simon Peter also came. He entered the tomb and saw the linen cloths lying there. The wrapping that had been on his head was not lying with the linen cloths but was folded up in a separate place by itself.**

Upon his arrival, Peter not only looked inside but also **entered the tomb**. He saw the same **linen cloths** that John had seen from the outside. From the inside, however, Peter noticed another detail. He saw that the head wrapping was **folded up in a separate place by itself**. Whatever had happened in the tomb had been done in an orderly manner.

What was the Gospel writer's purpose in mentioning these small details? For one thing, the details add to the reader's confidence in the Scripture's historical veracity. In addition, the writer showed in a dramatic way how God revealed the truth of the resurrection to Jesus' disciples in a methodical fashion. Each detail served as one more piece of evidence for the miraculous reality that conquered death and gives the sure hope of everlasting life to all who believe in Jesus Christ.

#### VERSE 8

**The other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, then also went in, saw, and believed.**

Following Peter's entrance, **the other disciple** (John) also entered the tomb. In the progression of three verbs, John revealed the essence of gospel transformation: he **went in, saw, and believed**. The fact that John believed in the resurrection of Jesus solely on the basis of the empty tomb is significant. Most of those who became convinced of Jesus' resurrection in the Gospel accounts did so after a visible manifestation of the risen Christ. One disciple, Thomas, refused to believe in Jesus' resurrection until he saw and touched the risen Christ. Jesus later told Thomas, "Because you have seen me you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe" (20:29). This is the kind of faith in Christ people today must exhibit.

The empty tomb served as a witness to Jesus' resurrection. Those who reject the resurrection of Jesus cannot give a credible answer for the empty tomb and Jesus' missing body. John was familiar with all of the possibilities

and concluded that Jesus had risen from the dead just as He promised. The belief in the resurrection is an essential element of the gospel of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 15:3-4).

Peter apparently did not come to believe in the resurrection at the same time John did. Luke's Gospel indicates that Peter went away "amazed at what had happened" (Luke 24:12) but not yet convinced of the resurrection. The Gospel accounts reveal the difficulty of belief that even many of Jesus' disciples experienced following His resurrection.

## VERSE 9

### **For they did not yet understand the Scripture that he must rise from the dead.**

At first glance, this verse seems to call into question John's belief that is expressed in 20:8. This verse emphasizes, however, that the disciples did not understand the Old Testament **Scripture** passages that predicted Jesus' resurrection. By the time John wrote his Gospel, the early church's leaders did have a fuller understanding of these Old Testament prophetic passages (see, for example, Ps. 16:8-11 and Acts 2:25-28). The empty tomb would be one of many proofs pointing to the certainty of Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Resurrection" on pages 1348–1349 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How is resurrection different from the kind of resuscitation to life that occurs in so-called near-death experiences? What reasons have you heard people give for having difficulty believing in Jesus' resurrection? How have you responded?

## MADE ALIVE THROUGH THE RESURRECTION (1 Cor. 15:20-22)

Paul began 1 Corinthians with an emphasis on the crucifixion of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 1:13-22). He used the phrase "word of the cross" (1:18) to summarize the gospel message. He first mentioned the resurrection in 6:14 in the context of confronting the Corinthians' seriously flawed view of permissible behavior. For Paul, the truth that Jesus' bodily resurrection guaranteed the believer's future bodily resurrection was proof enough that Christians should never try to justify sexually immoral behavior. He did not return to the theme of the resurrection until chapter 15, where he wrote an extensive explanation and defense of this vital doctrine.

## VERSE 20

**But as it is, Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.**

Paul made clear in 15:1-19 that the gospel he preached and the hope of believers stood squarely on the foundation of Jesus' resurrection. If the resurrection did not occur, then Paul was a liar (15:15) and Christians were still in their sins (15:17). Beginning in 15:20, Paul went on to declare that the certainty of Jesus' resurrection guaranteed the certainty of resurrection for believers. The Greek phrase rendered **but as it is** contrasts an unreal condition in verse 19—that Christ gives us hope only in this life—with the reality that Christ's resurrection is **the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep**. In other words, Jesus' resurrection opened the way for the believer's resurrection. The first reality guarantees the latter reality.

The term *firstfruits* harks back to the requirements in the law of Moses that the people of Israel dedicate to God their firstborn male children and herd animals (Ex. 13:1; Deut. 15:19) as well as a portion of each year's first harvested produce (Lev. 23:9-10; Deut. 26:1-10). The annual celebration of firstfruits reminded the Israelites that God gave them their life and livelihood.

In New Testament times, the feast began on the first day after the first Passover Sabbath—the time corresponding also to Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. Thus, Paul's description of the resurrected Christ as *the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep* had several important implications. First, it pointed to God as the source of new life. Only God can overrule the sting of death and create new life in its place. Second, the concept of *firstfruits* suggested that Jesus' resurrection guaranteed a great resurrection harvest of those who trust in Christ as they face death. Third, the idea of *firstfruits* gave hope that one day believers will receive new, spiritual bodies that are designed for living forever in God's eternal kingdom.

## VERSE 21

**For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead also comes through a man.**

The Greek word rendered **for** indicates that Paul continued to draw implications from the imagery of Christ as "the firstfruits." In the Israelite feast at which firstfruits offerings were made, people understood that giving the first portion of the harvest symbolized their gratitude for and dedication of the entire harvest to God. Paul used this understanding—the portion representing the whole—to further explain the legacies of death and resurrection. Just as **death came through a man** (Adam), likewise **resurrection of the dead** came through **a man** (Christ).

## VERSE 22

**For just as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive.**

Paul referred to the very first human being God created in the beginning. Genesis 2:7 declares that “the LORD God formed the man out of the dust from the ground and breathed the breath of life into his nostrils, and the man became a living being.” Afterward, God “made the rib he had taken from the man into a woman and brought her to the man” (Gen. 2:22). Following their sin in the garden of Eden, the man “named his wife Eve because she was the mother of all the living” (3:20).

Paul thus described the first human as a type of firstfruits of the entire human race. That is, because Adam yielded to temptation, sinned against God, and reaped the consequences of guilt and death, all humans after Adam inherit a sinful nature—**in Adam all die**. Paul reiterated this idea in Romans 5:12, writing, “Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, in this way death spread to all people, because all sinned.”

In contrast to Adam, Jesus Christ—fully human and fully God—did not sin and yet gave His life as the atoning sacrifice for sinners. As Paul stated in 2 Corinthians 5:21, “[God] made the one who did not know sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” In other words, **in Christ all will be made alive**. Adam’s sin resulted in condemnation of the human race, while Jesus’ death on the cross resulted in new life for all who believe in Him (2 Cor. 5:17).

## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Typology” on pages 1612–1615 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What examples can you name of Old Testament figures, people, or objects that serve as types and thus help explain New Testament truths?

## FUTURE FOUND IN THE RESURRECTION (1 Cor. 15:23-28)

Paul described the completion of the resurrection harvest in the future. Christ’s resurrection guarantees the bodily resurrection of believers

## VERSE 23

**But each in his own order: Christ, the firstfruits; afterward, at his coming, those who belong to Christ.**

Paul emphasized the sovereignty of God in accomplishing His plan of salvation. That plan will culminate with Christ's return in the end time. The Greek noun translated **order** could also describe the arrangement of military forces in groups. Indeed, this section of Paul's letter focuses on the great spiritual victory that Jesus Christ will usher in at His second coming. That victory was guaranteed when Christ was raised from the dead. His resurrection serves as **the firstfruits** of a coming great harvest when all **who belong to Christ** will be raised from the dead.

The resurrection of believers will be completed **at His coming**. The Greek word rendered *coming* also means "presence" or "appearing." In Paul's day, the term was used to describe a ruler's arrival in a city. City leaders in some cases cast new coins to commemorate the occasion and honor the visiting ruler.

#### VERSE 24

**Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, when he abolishes all rule and all authority and power.**

Following Christ's return will come **the end**. Paul often described eschatological events without indicating precisely how much time elapsed between them. We know, for example that approximately two millenia and counting have passed since Jesus' resurrection. His return and the bodily resurrection of believers still lies in the future. In addition, some Bible scholars contend that at least a one-thousand-year gap of time—the millennial reign of Christ described in Revelation 20:4-5—will fall between the resurrection of believers and the events depicted in 1 Corinthians 15:24. We should keep in mind, however, that Paul was not establishing a precise chronology of the end times. Rather, he was emphasizing the orderly, methodical plan God established to put down all sinful powers and restore His rule on earth.

The phrase **hands over the kingdom to God the Father** should not be interpreted to mean that Christ will not also rule. Paul was simply depicting that the kingdom belongs to God. Christ is the Divine Agent by which God's rule over humanity will be restored.

#### VERSE 25

**For he must reign until he puts all his enemies under his feet.**

In this verse, Paul marshaled Old Testament support for his declarations in the previous verse. In Psalm 110:1, God said (prophetically) to the future Messiah-King, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool." This is military imagery that depicts a conqueror putting down the king's **enemies** until they are nothing more than pavement stones on which the king walks.

Paul's message about resurrection not only gave believers hope for the future but also encouraged them to live faithfully in the here and now. The Corinthian believers lived under strict Roman rule and constant cultural pressures that were anything but godly. Paul challenged Christ's followers to remain faithful to their Lord and Savior, standing on the promise that Christ will return one day and restore God's rightful rule on the earth.

#### VERSE 26

### **The last enemy to be abolished is death.**

In New Testament teaching, **death** is an enemy. It is, in fact, **the last enemy** that Christ defeats and destroys. Paul earlier declared that death entered the bloodstream of all human experience when Adam sinned in the garden (1 Cor. 15:21). The tragic result was that "in Adam all die" (15:22). Further, although Jesus never sinned, He nevertheless laid down His life on the cross for our sins. His resurrection from the dead demonstrated that death could not hold Him (see Rom. 6:9; 2 Tim. 1:10). The writer of Hebrews viewed Jesus' triumph over death as a victory over Satan as well (Heb. 2:14).

Christ's triumph over death gives victory to all who trust in Him as Savior and Lord. Later in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul referred to the believer's victory in Christ as an end to the law's condemnation (see 15:56-57). Adam's legacy was the introduction of death by breaking God's law. Jesus fully obeyed the law, and His death on the cross liberated believers from its condemnation.

#### VERSE 27

### **For God has put everything under his feet. Now when it says "everything" is put under him, it is obvious that he who puts everything under him is the exception.**

Paul returned to the theme of the subjection of all authorities and powers to Christ. God created human beings in His image to be in authority over the earth as God's representative (Gen. 1:26-30). Adam forfeited that authority through sin. In time, therefore, the Father sent His Son Jesus Christ to restore God's rightful rule. Through Jesus' resurrection, **everything**, including death itself, was subjected again to divine authority. Paul made clear, however, that the term *everything* did not include God the Father.

#### VERSE 28

### **When everything is subject to Christ, then the Son himself will also be subject to the one who subjected everything to him, so that God may be all in all.**

In 15:28, Paul depicted the full and final completion of God's plan of redemption through Jesus Christ. In His death and resurrection, the Son of God accomplished victory over sin, death, and the grave; He defeated all authorities in opposition to God the Father. In the process He also provided the way of salvation for sinners. All who believe in Jesus Christ receive forgiveness of sin and everlasting life. At Christ's return, it will be demonstrated that **everything is subject to Christ**. At that time also, the Son will also **be subject to the one who subjected everything to him**.

Throughout church history, skeptics have pointed to Paul's statement regarding Christ's being subject to the Father as possible evidence against Christ's divine nature. Augustine of Hippo, an early Christian theologian and philosopher, explained Christ's subjection to the Father as one of mission, not essential nature. That is, Christ humbly subjected Himself when He took on human nature and came to earth to save sinners (see Phil. 2:5-9). Paul was viewing Jesus as the rightful heir of the Davidic throne who conquered and presented the victory to God the Father in fulfillment of 2 Samuel 7:14-16.

The phrase **so that God may be all in all** describes the final perfection of the new creation. Today we live in a universe divided between good and evil. Evil forces compete for the attention and loyalty of human beings. When the victory is complete and all authorities are put in subjection to the Father, everything will be focused on glorifying God. Our hearts, minds, and resurrected bodies will focus on the glory of God all of the time. This is a consummation that encourages and gives hope to believers today.

The glorious consummation of the perfection Paul described in these verses began with the death of Christ on the cross for sins and His resurrection from the dead on the first Easter morning. For Paul, to deny or diminish the importance of the resurrection for Christian faith was unthinkable. Some of the Christians in Corinth failed to grasp the essential nature of the resurrection and its promise of a glorious future for all believers. As we celebrate the resurrection in our day, let us look back with gratitude for Christ's victory and forward with anticipation of all that God has prepared for us as His church—both now and in the life to come!

## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Death" on pages 405–406 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How does the death of Christ abolish death for believers? How does the death and resurrection of Christ encourage you to live faithfully for Christ today?

# REMEMBERING THE SACRIFICE

Believers are to approach remembrances of Jesus' death with reverence and unity.

The older I get, the more I appreciate reminders. With today's technology, I don't have to tie a string around my finger. I simply tell my smartphone to remind me to do something on such and such a day and time. It automatically schedules a verbal or written reminder. Needless to say, I rely on these alerts to keep me on track during a busy week. I just have to remember to take my phone with me at all times!

The God who created us knows that our human minds need regular reminders, or memorials, lest we forget important truths. God has therefore established memorials in relating to His covenant people. These memorials remind God's people to be thankful and obedient to His commands.

Memorials differ from personal experiences. They focus on events in the past that have implications for the present and future. Preceding the Israelites' exodus from Egypt, God gave His people the Passover ritual as a memorial. From that time forward the observance reminded the Israelites of their divine protection from the death angel and miraculous rescue from Egyptian slavery (see Ex. 12:21-28).

Thousands of years later, Jesus Christ gathered with His disciples on the evening before His crucifixion to observe the Passover. In the midst of the meal, He declared that He would soon fulfill the meaning of Passover by giving His life on the cross as the perfect sacrifice (see Luke 22:14-20). In saying this, Christ established the new covenant memorial that the church today still refers to as the Lord's Supper.

Sadly, the church hasn't always properly used the Lord's Supper. Some churches have neglected it or failed to honor its true meaning. Such was the case with the church of Corinth in Paul's day. In this session, we will explore Paul's instructions to that church about the Lord's Supper. May we use this study to prompt our remembrance of and deep gratitude for Christ's sacrifice.

# UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

## 1 CORINTHIANS 11:2-34

In 1 Corinthians 11:2, Paul began a section in which he focused on this congregation's worship practices. He had received reports of irregularities, confusion, and divisions that spilled over into the church's worship gatherings. At least some of the problems likely stemmed from the "anything goes" attitudes Paul addressed in chapter 10. Paul wanted the Corinthians to realize that not every activity promoted genuine worship of God, even if the activity in question came cloaked in a spiritual guise.

Many Bible scholars consider 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 to be a difficult passage to interpret and rightly apply in today's church context. Paul was addressing the Corinthian church's failure to maintain certain distinctions between men and women in their worship gatherings. One such distinction involved the practice of women wearing head coverings and men not wearing them while they worshiped. The deeper point Paul appeared to be making was that both men and women should seek to honor the Lord in the way God made them (male or female). Genuine worship is not about calling attention to oneself but about glorifying God.

In 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, Paul addressed a report he had received about some believers' shameful behavior in connection with the Lord's Supper and fellowship meal. The factions that had formed in the congregation demonstrated disunity and a lack of Christian love for one another. Paul rebuked the selfishness of some Corinthian believers in their neglect of the poor and reminded the congregation that the Lord's Supper was a memorial to the sacrifice of Christ for their sins. He called for honest spiritual self-examination by each believer before participating in the Lord's Supper. Failure to do so would make those believers subject to God's discipline.

# EXPLORE THE TEXT

## WITH WORSHIP (1 Cor. 11:17-22)

### VERSE 17

**Now in giving this instruction I do not praise you, since you come together not for the better but for the worse.**

In 11:2, Paul commended the Corinthian believers for remembering him and holding fast to the traditions he had taught them. He may have intended that

general word of praise to help prepare them for the corrective instruction he was about to deliver. He could not **praise** them for their attitudes and behavior in worship gatherings and fellowship meals. The Greek word rendered **come together** in 11:17 refers to the church's gatherings for worship. Their meetings should have been characterized by unity, spiritual encouragement, and genuine worship of God. Sadly, the Corinthians too often came to their worship gatherings **not for the better but for the worse**.

Perhaps Paul had in mind the Old Testament example of Malachi the prophet. Malachi wished that someone might lock the temple doors if that would stop the people's shameful, insincere worship (Mal. 1:10). Paul wanted the Corinthians believers to realize how shameful their behavior in worship was, repent of it, and begin behaving better.

## VERSE 18

**For to begin with, I hear that when you come together as a church there are divisions among you, and in part I believe it.**

Paul confronted the presence of factions in the Corinthian church at the beginning of his letter (see 1:11-13). Some of Chloe's people had told him of this problem, which centered around believers' allegiance to their favorite Christian leaders. Paul may have been referring to the same report when he wrote of hearing about **divisions** that became glaringly evident when the Corinthians gathered for worship.

The words **in part I believe it** probably reflect not so much Paul's doubts about the report as his disappointment in hearing the extent of the Corinthians' disunity and immature behavior. He didn't want to believe that Christians would act this way, but the reports he received showed otherwise.

We should not pass over the phrase **come together as a church** without commenting on Christian worship facilities in Paul's day. Jewish worship took place primarily in the temple in Jerusalem until its destruction in AD 70. In addition, many cities in the Roman Empire had synagogue buildings in which Jews gathered for instruction and fellowship. Jewish believers, including Paul, continued to worship in the temple and in synagogues for some time. Eventually, however, Christ's followers were banned from the synagogues and began meeting in homes and outdoor spaces. When a church gathered for worship in someone's house, the place took on a heightened significance because of the presence of the Christian assembly. The church's coming together for worship made the place holy in that it was set apart for the worship of God. As the temple or synagogue provided a sacred space for Jews, a home hosted by a Christian leader became a sacred place for Christians during worship.

## VERSE 19

**Indeed, it is necessary that there be factions among you, so that those who are approved may be recognized among you.**

Bible scholars have debated the meaning of this verse. One view holds that Paul was using irony and sarcasm. He did not approve of having **factions** (“heresies,” KJV) in the church. Rather, he was sarcastically mimicking those in the church who thought they were spiritually superior (**who are approved**) and refused to have fellowship with other, perhaps poorer, believers.

Other Bible scholars understand the verse to be straightforward, not ironic. In this view, Paul declared that while church *factions* were evidence of spiritual immaturity, God would still work in the midst of the situation to help the Corinthians distinguish between true and false doctrine as well as holy and unholy behavior. Paul looked forward to the time when God would separate the righteous from the wicked (see Matt. 25:31-34).

## VERSE 20

**When you come together, then, it is not to eat the Lord’s Supper.**

The problems of disunity and immaturity surfaced even when the Corinthian believers came together **to eat the Lord’s Supper**. Interestingly, this is the only occurrence of the phrase *the Lord’s Supper* in the New Testament. It refers, of course, to the memorial Jesus established when He celebrated Passover with His disciples on the night before His crucifixion. After Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, the followers of Christ continued to celebrate the memorial, perhaps in the context of a larger, shared meal (see Acts 2:46; 2 Pet. 2:13; Jude 1:12). These fellowship feasts gave believers opportunities to show unity and genuine love for one another. The Corinthians, however, demonstrated selfishness rather than love at their feasts.

Holding communal meals in homes was not uncommon in the Greco-Roman culture of ancient Corinth. Houses that could host such meals usually had an open room called the triclinium [trigh KLIH nih uhm], where guests reclined on couches around low tables while eating. If the number of guests exceeded the available space in the triclinium, then custom dictated that the host assign guests of lesser social status to other rooms or areas. In addition, guests in the triclinium received the first and choice menu items, while other guests received inferior food and drink. People understood and accepted these social distinctions without much question or debate.

In contrast to the rigid distinctions of Greco-Roman society, the early church presented a unique, countercultural community. Believers could be wealthy or poor, slave or free, male or female, of any ethnicity, and of either Jewish or Gentile background. Ideally, none of these distinctions made one

believer more spiritual, more loved by God, or more important in the church than another. Then as now, however, churches did not always practice the Christian ideals they professed (see Jas. 2:1-9).

Paul expressed great disappointment that the believers of Corinth failed to live up to Christian ideals in their worship and fellowship. Rather than using their shared meal and observance of the Lord's Supper to express unity and love for all believers, they demonstrated the divisive, worldly practices of the culture around them. They effectively turned the Lord's Supper into an act of selfish hypocrisy. In Paul's view, the Corinthians had no intention to remember Christ's sacrificial death when they gathered for worship.

#### VERSE 21

**For at the meal, each one eats his own supper. So one person is hungry while another gets drunk!**

There never was or ever will be a more selfless act of love than Jesus' substitutionary death on the cross for sinners. Yet, at the meal commemorating Jesus' sacrificial death, the Corinthian church acted shamefully. Paul condemned the believers' "each-man-for-himself" attitude displayed **at the meal** ("in eating," KJV, ESV). The result was that some Christians—probably the poorer ones—got nothing to eat, while others overindulged (**another gets drunk**). The Corinthian church acted more like the world than the Spirit-led body of Christ in the world.

#### VERSE 22

**Don't you have homes in which to eat and drink? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I praise you? I do not praise you in this matter!**

Paul asked the Corinthians a rhetorical question that anticipated an answer of yes. The believers, in fact, did **have homes in which to eat and drink**. The question therefore implies that the gathered church, whenever and wherever it meets, is to be an environment for doing "nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility [considering] others as more important than yourselves" (Phil. 2:3).

Paul did not mean that it was OK for Christians to be gluttons and drunkards in their homes (see Eph. 5:17-18). Rather, he emphasized the unique environment of the gathered church. We do not gather as believers for the purpose of overindulging our physical appetites but for worshiping Christ and humbly ministering to the entire body of Christ.

By their selfish, divisive actions, some of the Corinthians showed contempt for **the church of God**. The Greek verb rendered **despise** literally means “to think against” and can also be translated “scorn” or “disregard.” Moreover, the offenders—probably some of the wealthier Christians—humiliated the poor believers (**those who have nothing**). Paul could not and did not **praise** the Corinthian church **in this matter**. Indeed, he intended his instruction as a warning. The Corinthians’ selfish, divisive behavior not only crippled church unity but also invited God’s disciplinary judgment on the congregation.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

What are ways that your church promotes or exhibits the practice of Christian community among all the believers? How is the gathered church (when believers meet for worship and ministry) like and unlike a family?

### WITH REMEMBRANCE (1 Cor. 11:23-26)

Paul further instructed the Corinthians regarding their observance of the Lord’s Supper. He reminded them of whom and what the Lord’s Supper commemorated. He also emphasized its significance as the church’s ongoing dramatic proclamation of the gospel.

#### VERSES 23-24

**For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: On the night when he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, broke it, and said, “This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”**

During his initial ministry in Corinth, Paul had instructed the new believers about the Lord’s Supper. He probably had learned from Peter and the other apostles the authoritative version of what Jesus said and did on that Passover night in the upper room. Paul declared that he had faithfully taught the Corinthians what the Lord gave him to say. The implication was that the Corinthians’ had corrupted what Paul taught them.

At various times, the Passover ritual featured different elements, including unleavened bread, bitter herbs, wine, and lamb meat. When Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper with His disciples **on the night when he was betrayed**, He focused on two of these elements: bread and wine. To the people of Israel, the unleavened bread pointed back to the exodus. God instructed the Israelites at that time to prepare unleavened bread so they would be ready to follow the

Lord at a moment's notice (see Ex. 12:8-11). Jesus used the Passover **bread** to signify His **body** that would be abused, beaten, and nailed to a Roman cross. The phrase **which is for you** emphasizes that Jesus suffered brutal treatment to His body for the sake of others (see Isa. 53:4-6).

In the same way that the unleavened bread of the Passover ritual represented a deeper, different reality (readiness to obey God) for the people of Israel, the bread of the Lord's Supper symbolizes, or represents, the different yet deeper reality of Christ's suffering on behalf of believers. The bread does not literally become Christ's body by some mystical transformation. When Christians today partake of the bread of the Lord's Supper, we do so **in remembrance of** Jesus, who endured unthinkable suffering on our behalf.

#### VERSE 25

**In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, and said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."**

The Passover ritual involved perhaps as many as four cups of wine that were drunk in commemoration of God's redeeming the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. As He did with the Passover bread, Jesus applied a new, deeper meaning to **the cup** of wine for His followers. He declared that *the cup* represented **the new covenant** God would establish through His sacrificial death on the cross.

Centuries before Jesus' day, the prophet Jeremiah had foreseen this new covenant and revealed that it would restore God's people to a right relationship with God by the forgiveness of their sins (see Jer. 31:31-34). The Old Testament people of Israel associated forgiveness of sins with the once-a-year sprinkling of an animal's blood on the ark's mercy seat on the Day of Atonement (see Lev. 16:15-16). Jesus declared that His shed **blood** would provide once-for-all forgiveness in the new covenant. Thus, when believers today partake of *the cup* in the Lord's Supper, we are reminded that Christ gave His life for us on the cross that we might be forgiven of our sins and restored to a right relationship with God.

#### VERSE 26

**For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.**

Scripture gives no clear indication of how frequently churches in the New Testament era observed the Lord's Supper. Consequently, churches today follow different practices, including weekly, monthly, or quarterly observances.

The words **for as often as** indicate that Paul was not concerned with the frequency of the Corinthians' observance of the Lord's Supper. Rather, he focused on reminding them of its meaning and significance. He wanted the Corinthians to worship the Lord honestly, genuinely, and in unity.

In observing the Lord's Supper, believers not only remember Christ's sacrifice but also **proclaim the Lord's death**. We dramatically testify to a lost world that Jesus forgives, transforms, and gives new life to all who believe in Him. In light of the problems of selfishness in the Corinthian church, Paul wanted believers to realize how hypocritical it was to combine sinful excesses with a memorial to the death of Christ for our sins.

The phrase **until he comes** points to the reality of the resurrection. We as believers worship and serve a living Savior. The resurrection is an essential foundation of the gospel. Paul's reference to the return of Christ reminds us also that one day we will stand before Christ to give an account of our worship and service.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

In the article titled "Covenants," read the section titled "the New Covenant" on pages 359–360 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. Then read Hebrews 9:15-17. How does observing the Lord's Supper help you appreciate the significance of Jesus' death?

## WITH EXAMINATION (1 Cor. 11:27-29)

Paul urged the Corinthian believers to honestly examine their attitudes and behavior when observing the Lord's Supper. He warned that God would discipline any believer who disdained Christ's sacrifice.

### VERSE 27

**So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sin against the body and blood of the Lord.**

The words **so then** signal that Paul had reached a conclusion based on his previous statements. Those who persisted in observing the Lord's Supper **in an unworthy manner** ("unworthily," KJV) would be **guilty of sin against the body and blood of the Lord**. The phrase *in an unworthy manner* translates a single Greek word. It speaks of an attitude of hypocrisy and irreverence. By participating in the Lord's Supper, some believers in Corinth professed

that they had been forgiven of their sins and transformed by Jesus Christ. However, these same believers acted hypocritically by humiliating some of their brothers and sisters in Christ in the fellowship meal. In effect, they treated the worship of God with contempt and demonstrated a shameful lack of reverence for Christ's atoning sacrifice.

## VERSE 28

### **Let a person examine himself; in this way let him eat the bread and drink from the cup.**

Paul offered a solution to the Corinthians: **let a person examine himself**. Christians do well to approach every congregational worship service with an honest spiritual examination. The idea of personal inventory alone would set the stage for a serious attitude toward worship. We should enter times of worship with great care and reverence.

The Corinthians' sins—like all our sins—violated the new covenant through faith in Jesus Christ. Our attitudes, words, and actions need to be scrutinized to see if they conform to the moral principles of the new covenant. One of the most difficult tasks that we as Christians undertake is personal evaluation. Too often we prefer to criticize others while overlooking our own shortcomings. If we desire to avoid the sins of hypocrisy and resulting judgment, we must learn to examine ourselves (see Matt. 7:1-5).

The first stage of self-examination should focus on our relationship with God. Any unconfessed sins or attitudes should be acknowledged (1 John 1:9). We should ask God to forgive our sins so that our prayers and worship will be unhindered (Isa. 59:1-2). The second stage of self-examination should focus on our attitudes and relationships with others. Jesus encouraged anyone with relationship problems to first seek reconciliation before making an offering in worship (Matt. 5:23-24). If the Corinthians had taken time to examine their attitudes and actions, they would not have sinned against God (eating and drinking to excess) or humiliated other believers.

## VERSE 29

### **For whoever eats and drinks without recognizing the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself.**

Paul gave a different description of the sins related to the Lord's Supper when he described the offender as one who **eats and drinks without recognizing the body**. Bible scholars debate whether the phrase *the body* refers to the church as Christ's body or to Christ Himself. In either view, the result was that the offenders' lack of reverence and authenticity invited God's disciplinary **judgment**. Paul urged them to examine their hearts.

Treating the memorial of the new covenant with contempt has both present and future consequences. In 11:30-32, Paul went on to explain to the Corinthians that God's judgment had already fallen on some believers. Some were sick and others had died under the judgment of God (11:30). These illnesses and deaths were a direct result of disobedient members who were guilty of taking the Lord's Supper unworthily. Paul wanted the Corinthians to know that these punishments should awaken those guilty of their sins and motivate them to repent (11:32). The future consequences would involve a loss of rewards when they gave an account of their stewardship of life before the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10).

After studying Paul's rebuke and warnings to the Corinthians, some readers may be tempted to avoid taking the Lord's Supper as a precaution. This would be a foolish response to Paul's instructions regarding this memorial. We can be involved in no more important worship experience than taking the Lord's Supper in memory of Jesus' sacrifice for our sins whereby we proclaim His death until He returns. None of us will be spiritually perfect when we partake of the Lord's Supper. All of us are in a state of spiritual imperfection in this life.

Taking the Lord's Supper is a powerful act of worship for those who are yielded to the Spirit of God and who seek to honor God in worship. The Lord's Supper must never be treated casually or carelessly. Sadly, some believers approach the Lord's Supper observance as a meaningless repetition and take it for granted. Each opportunity to observe the Lord's Supper should be an exciting time to remember what Jesus Christ did for us when He took our sins and punishment on the cross. The Lord's Supper is also a communal meal in which we remember our obligations to love and serve our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. Finally, what is true regarding the need for preparation and sincerity in observing the Lord's Supper also applies to every opportunity for worship in our churches. We should never approach opportunities for worship and discipleship without a profound sense of their importance. Worshiping God is the most important thing we will ever do in this life and in the life to come!

## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Discipline" on pages 425–426 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How is divine discipline an example of God's love for His people? How can you and other worshippers carry out Paul's counsel to examine yourselves before entering into times of congregational worship?

# SERVING GOD'S PEOPLE

Believers receive special gifts from God for service to Him and His people.

God designed the human body with an amazing complexity and interdependence. Each part, when healthy and functioning properly, is necessary and contributes to the well-being of the whole body. We quickly recognize the importance of vital organs such as the brain, heart, kidneys, liver, and lungs for survival, but sometimes we do not fully appreciate how these organs work together to maintain life and health. The brain sends necessary signals that control and regulate vital body functions. The kidneys remove impurities, regulate electrolytes, and aid in maintaining a safe blood pressure. The liver is vital for detoxification and other processes necessary to keep a healthy metabolism. The heart pumps blood throughout the body, supplying oxygen and removing metabolic wastes. The lungs provide oxygen to the bloodstream and expel carbon dioxide. Each organ is vital to survival, and each one depends on the contributions of the others for survival.

Paul used the human body's unity and diversity of its various parts to illustrate God's intention for the church. When we receive Christ as Savior, the Holy Spirit grafts us into the body of Christ. The Spirit gives each believer one or more spiritual gifts that are designed to be used in strengthening the body of Christ, the church. When we as Christians use our gifts as the Spirit intended, then our churches will grow and prosper as the Lord desires. Our spiritual gifts, functioning together with the spiritual gifts of others, contribute to a church's worship, ministry, evangelism, and missions.

In this session, we will examine the purpose of spiritual gifts and seek to understand better the individual spiritual gifts that Paul described to the believers in the Corinthian church. We will also seek to understand how these gifts were designed to work together for the good of all believers. Finally, we will be motivated to commit to using our spiritual gifts for the glory of God and the building up of the body of Christ today.

# UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

## 1 CORINTHIANS 12:1-31

In chapters 12–14, Paul addressed concerns surrounding the nature and function of spiritual gifts in the Corinthian church. He first mentioned this theme in the opening thanksgiving, commending the church for not lacking “any spiritual gift” as they anticipated Christ’s return (1:7). Nevertheless, the Corinthians displayed confusion regarding the Holy Spirit’s work in and among them as believers. Paul chided them for failing to discern spiritual matters and continuing to act like spiritual babies (3:1). He had to remind them that their bodies were the temple of the Holy Spirit and not to be used for sexual immorality (6:18-19).

Consistent with the Corinthians’ display of spiritual immaturity, they turned a wonderful act of divine grace—the granting of spiritual gifts—into a selfish spiritual wedge. Paul thus began chapter 12 by contrasting the believers’ pagan past in lifeless idolatry with the dynamic worship of the one true God made possible by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit enables believers to know and affirm that “Jesus is Lord” (12:3).

In 12:4-6, Paul spoke of unity in diversity regarding the Holy Spirit’s ministry in the church. He explained that the Spirit distributes to all believers different gifts, ministries, and activities. Still, all of the various manifestations of the Spirit originate from the one true God.

In 12:7-10, Paul focused on the Holy Spirit’s assignment of spiritual gifts to each believer. He identified a number of spiritual gifts that could be found among the Corinthian believers. He emphasized that believers were to use their spiritual gifts to build up the congregation, not divide it.

In 12:11-31, Paul emphasized the Holy Spirit’s sovereignty in giving each believer one or more spiritual gifts. He used the human body with its different yet interdependent parts to illustrate God’s design for the church. He confronted the Corinthians’ immaturity in this matter.

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

### **DIVERSE** (1 Cor. 12:4-6)

The Corinthian believers may have asked Paul questions about the importance and function of spiritual gifts (12:1). Regardless, Paul knew that the church needed further instruction. The issue was one more area in which the Corinthian believers experienced confusion and division.

#### VERSE 4

### Now there are different gifts, but the same Spirit.

Paul emphasized both unity and diversity in the body of Christ. Instead of an “either-or” contrast, the church is a “both-and” phenomenon. Paul described this reality in a series of statements containing the terms **different** (“diversities,” KJV; “varieties,” ESV) and **the same**. The Greek term rendered *different* occurs only three times in the New Testament—in this and the subsequent two verses. The verb form literally means “to choose through” and emphasizes God’s power to endow believers with various allotments of divine grace so that He can work through them to extend that grace to others.

The word rendered **gifts** is derived from a Greek root word meaning “grace” or “favor.” It is the basis also of our English terms *charisma* and *charismatic*. Paul sometimes used a form of the word in reference to salvation as a gift from God (Rom. 5:15; 6:23). He used it previously in 1 Corinthians to describe a believer’s capacity to remain single and celibate (7:7). In 12:4, he used the term to describe abilities related to ministry within the body of Christ. Every use of the word emphasizes divine origin and enablement.

Spiritual gifts are not the same as natural talents or abilities. We know that people differ in their natural abilities based on inherited traits. These natural abilities are from God too, but unbelievers inherit them as well as believers. Spiritual gifts, unlike natural abilities, are given to Christians. The provision of spiritual gifts by the Holy Spirit reveals that God’s people must have divine enablement to fulfill God’s design for the church.

Paul declared that the various gifts of grace nevertheless come from one and *the same* Spirit. He emphasized the interdependence and unity of all who possess spiritual gifts. The Spirit does not distribute these gifts haphazardly but purposefully and intentionally. Not every believer receives the same gift, because many different gifts are needed. Each gift is a specialty that corresponds to the needs of the congregation. The emphasis on *the same* Spirit also points to the vital importance of all spiritual gifts.

#### VERSE 5

### There are different ministries, but the same Lord.

The contrast here is between **different ministries** and **the same Lord**. One form of the word translated *ministries* comes across into English as *deacon*. Deacons are servant-leaders who assist in meeting various needs of church members (see Acts 6:1-3). Paul likely used the term in 1 Corinthians 12:5 to refer to the kinds of service that God calls every believer to complete. In Ephesians 4:12, Paul taught that God calls some believers to be spiritual leaders who equip all believers for the “work of ministry.” This statement

reminds us that every Christian, not just a church's spiritual leaders, is a servant of the gospel.

Paul used the term *Lord* in reference to Jesus Christ. He was building a case that the three Persons of the Godhead—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—act in unity to equip God's diverse people to serve with grace and unity.

## VERSE 6

**And there are different activities, but the same God produces each gift in each person.**

The Greek word rendered **activities** (“operations,” KJV; “kinds of working,” NIV) appears only here and in 12:10 (“performing”) in all of the New Testament. The term emphasizes having energy and power to accomplish a spiritual work. Some Christians have good intentions to serve in their local churches but then hesitate because they feel unqualified or unable. Paul's point in this verse answers that hesitation. Whatever God calls believers to do in service, He also equips and empowers them to do.

The phrase **the same God** completes Paul's references to the three Persons of the Trinity. God is the ultimate example of unity in diversity. He exists in three Persons with distinct personal attributes yet without any division of nature, essence, or being. The one, true God has therefore designed His church to be filled with diverse, individually gifted believers who are united in the one purpose of glorifying the Savior, Jesus Christ. A divided, immature congregation of believers cannot properly fulfill that purpose.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Minister, Ministry” on pages 1109–1110 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. In what sense is Jesus the supreme example of what ministry involves? What is your response to knowing the Lord has specifically equipped you to serve Him?

## SPECIFIC (1 Cor. 12:7-10)

Having stated the origin and purpose of spiritual gifts, Paul next identified nine different gifts that the Holy Spirit distributes to believers. Most likely this list is not exhaustive but rather is illustrative. Paul wanted to emphasize the diversity of spiritual gifts, the fact that the one true God is the giver of all gifts, and the unifying purpose behind spiritual gifts.

## VERSE 7

### **A manifestation of the Spirit is given to each person for the common good:**

Many Bible commentators point to this verse as the key for understanding Paul's focus in chapter 12. The phrase **manifestation of the Spirit** describes the origin of all spiritual gifts. The Greek word rendered *manifestation* refers to a disclosure, a coming to light of something. Paul emphasized that when Christians serve others by using their spiritual giftedness, they disclose the Holy Spirit's presence and power.

The Greek term rendered **is given** points also to divine empowerment. Believers do not pick and choose their own spiritual gifts. Instead, the Spirit gives **to each person** who is a believer the gift or gifts that individual needs to serve most effectively. Moreover, God does not give spiritual gifts only to vocational ministers or seminary-trained individuals. Every believer receives at least one spiritual gift. Local churches need all of their members to use their spiritual gifts in concert with one another.

Paul emphasized as well that God intends for each and every spiritual gift to be used **for the common good** ("to profit withal," KJV). We do not receive spiritual gifts for our glory or benefit. Rather, we receive them so that we can manifest God's presence and power by ministering to others and thereby building up the church.

## VERSE 8

### **to one is given a message of wisdom through the Spirit, to another, a message of knowledge by the same Spirit,**

Paul identified in 12:8 the first two of nine spiritual gifts that he knew were evident among the Corinthians believers. Additional lists of spiritual gifts (with some overlaps) can be found in Romans 12:6-8, 1 Corinthians 12:8-10, and 1 Peter 4:10-11. New Testament scholars have grouped and classified the gifts in various ways, but Paul likely was not attempting to give an exhaustive list in any of his writings.

God gives some believers **a message of wisdom**. The term rendered *message* is *logos*, meaning "word." In this context it refers to a God-given utterance or communication about how to live wisely. Early in his letter to the Corinthians, Paul contrasted worldly wisdom to wisdom from God (1 Cor. 2:6-16). Genuine wisdom, according to Scripture, is to know and fear God (Prov. 9:10). The greatest expression of God's wisdom is the cross of Christ (1 Cor. 1:23-24). The spiritual gift of communicating wisdom, therefore, is supernatural by definition. The believer with this gift is able to communicate spiritual truth about God in understandable, applicable ways.

God may give other believers **a message of knowledge**. Bible scholars do not all agree about how this gift differs from the previous one. Like wisdom, knowledge was an important concept to the Corinthians. In chapter 8, Paul warned about boasting of one's knowledge and allowing it to become detrimental to relationships (8:1,7,10-11). In chapter 13, he insisted that believers needed to let love control their use of knowledge (13:2,8). The spiritual gift of knowledge may therefore refer to the ability to humbly communicate spiritual concepts to others.

#### **VERSE 9**

**to another, faith by the same Spirit, to another, gifts of healing by the one Spirit,**

Paul identified two additional spiritual gifts in 12:9. The gift of **faith** in this context needs to be carefully distinguished from the saving faith that every believer exhibits at conversion. The Scripture speaks, of course, of saving faith as a gift from God and not a work that we complete (see Eph. 2:8). Saving faith is a surrender of will, a wholehearted trust in what Christ did for us on the cross. In addition, all believers should experience faith—that is, growing faithfulness—a part of the fruit of the Holy Spirit (see Gal. 5:22).

The spiritual gift of faith is a special endowment given by the Holy Spirit to some, but not all, believers. Many Bible scholars link this gift to miraculous acts, pointing to 13:2 as support (see also Matt. 17:20). The spiritual gift of faith allows some believers to exhibit extraordinary belief in God's power for particular needs.

Next, Paul identified **gifts of healing** (literally, "healings"). Jesus' ministry included various types of healings, from healing Simon Peter's mother-in-law of a high fever (Matt. 8:14-15) to exorcising demons (Mark 5:1-17), restoring sight (John 9:1-7), cleansing lepers (Luke 17:11-19), and raising the dead (John 11:38-44). Christ gave His apostles the authority to heal in the early days of the church (see Acts 3:6; 14:8-10; 19:11-12; 28:7-9). The Lord did not work miraculous healings through all of the early Christians, however. These healings had two primary purposes. One was to alleviate the suffering of the person healed, and the second was to authenticate the gospel messenger and the message as divinely approved.

#### **VERSE 10**

**to another, the performing of miracles, to another, prophecy, to another, distinguishing between spirits, to another, different kinds of tongues, to another, interpretation of tongues.**

Some Bible scholars point out the similarity between gifts of healing and **the performing of miracles**. On the other hand, Paul may have had in mind miraculous actions such as when Elymas the magician was blinded (Acts 13:8-11) or when Ananias and Sapphira died as a consequence of their lying to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:1-11).

Paul identified **prophecy** as yet another spiritual gift. Prophets occupied an important role in both the Old and New Testaments. Their gift could be described as both foretelling and forth-telling. Foretelling involves the prediction of future events (see Acts 11:28). Forth-telling describes the delivery of a divine message for a specific audience at a specific time. In 1 Corinthians 14:3, Paul described the purposes of prophetic speech as “strengthening, encouragement, and consolation” (14:3). The God-given messages delivered by those with the gift of prophecy edified and instructed the congregation in matters of spiritual truth.

A related spiritual gift was **distinguishing between spirits** (“discerning of spirits,” KJV). Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians 5:20-21, “Don’t despise prophecies, but test all things. Hold on to what is good.” His point was that in a time of competing spiritual voices, God gave some of His people the ability to discern the trustworthy voices. The word *spirits* points to the origin of the message delivered by the prophet. The person with this gift could determine whether the message was from the Holy Spirit or not.

The final two gifts that Paul identified (**different kinds of tongues** and **interpretation of tongues**) are related as well. The Greek word rendered *tongues* usually refers to various languages spoken by different nations or people groups. In 13:1, Paul referred to “angelic tongues.” Much scholarly literature has been devoted to explaining this spiritual gift. However, Bible scholars differ in their views to this day. Let us consider a couple of important observations. First, the gift of speaking in a previously unlearned language was given to some but not all believers (12:30). Second, it was a gift that required a corresponding gift of *interpretation*, and only one person at a time was allowed to speak (14:27). Third, the Corinthian believers overly prized this mysterious gift, and Paul warned them it could be confusing to others rather than helpful (14:16-17).

## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Spiritual Gifts” on pages 1499–1501 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What was the central purpose of the Holy Spirit’s assigning individual gifts to every believer?

## INTENTIONAL (1 Cor. 12:11-12,21-26)

Paul used the analogy of the human body to illustrate the importance of each spiritually gifted believer serving in church. The Holy Spirit distributes gifts strategically in each congregation for its strengthening.

### VERSE 11

**One and the same Spirit is active in all these, distributing to each person as he wills.**

The language of this verse points back to Paul's statements in 12:4-7. He emphasized again that the **one and same Spirit** sovereignly chooses the spiritual gifts for each believer. The Spirit's decisions belong to the overall purposes of God in accomplishing His plan of salvation. Some of the Corinthians had lost sight of the origin of their spiritual gifts. They acted as though they deserved the gifts or received them for their own benefit. Paul further emphasized that spiritual gifts are diverse and tailored to each believer. The Corinthians overly prized some spiritual gifts while disparaging others. Paul wrote to correct this attitude and to declare the crucial nature of all spiritual gifts working in concert to glorify Christ and benefit all believers.

### VERSE 12

**For just as the body is one and has many parts, and all the parts of that body, though many, are one body — so also is Christ.**

Paul is the only New Testament writer who refers to the church as the body of Christ (Rom. 7:4; 1 Cor. 10:16; Eph. 4:12). He used the analogy to good advantage in his case for unity and diversity in the Corinthian church. The human **body is one** entity but consists of **many parts**. The noun translated *parts* refers to the various limbs and organs of the body that work together for its survival and growth. The phrase **so also is Christ** makes clear that Paul saw the church as the body of Christ.

### VERSE 21

**The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" Or again, the head can't say to the feet, "I don't need you!"**

In 12:13-20, Paul revealed that some Christians' worldly attitudes about spiritual gifts led to division rather than unity. In 12:21, Paul spoke of the importance in the human body of the **eye, the hand, the head, and the feet**. None of these body parts would ever declare to the others that the body didn't need them. Some of the Corinthians, however, were communicating

that kind of message to other believers. Paul wanted all the Christians in Corinth to acknowledge their dependency on one another.

#### **VERSE 22**

**On the contrary, those parts of the body that are weaker are indispensable.**

The phrase **parts of the body that are weaker** refers in Paul's analogy to the despised members of the congregation. Paul stated near the beginning of his letter that God chose the weak and despised (the majority of the Corinthian congregation) for salvation to shame those in the world who thought of themselves as being spiritually superior (1 Cor. 1:27-28). Perhaps the *weaker* believers were looked down on because of their poverty, lack of social position, or seemingly less prominent spiritual gifts. Even though these despised members seemed weaker, they were in reality as vital to the body of Christ in Corinth as any other members.

#### **VERSES 23-24**

**And those parts of the body that we consider less honorable, we clothe these with greater honor, and our unrespectable parts are treated with greater respect, which our respectable parts do not need. Instead, God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the less honorable,**

Paul's argument here contrasted unrespectable parts of the body with those that are respectable. The analogy is that we cover certain parts of the body with clothing or other means for the purpose of modesty. Paul may have been referring in his analogy to the different social classes that existed in Greco-Roman society. Throughout 1 Corinthians he rebuked the church for adopting worldly categories. He urged the Corinthians to treat one another respectfully and value every believer as vital to the church. Those who placed greater value on some members and their spiritual gifts over others failed to honor God's sovereign choices.

#### **VERSE 25**

**so that there would be no division in the body, but that the members would have the same concern for each other.**

God's will for the church is that **there would be no division in the body**. God wants the church to enjoy the same unity as the Godhead enjoys (see John 17:20-23). The Corinthians created sinful divisions in a variety of ways.

They divided over human leaders. They divided over legal disputes. They divided over social standing and wealth. They also divided over the importance of various believers and their spiritual gifts.

True unity can only be achieved when believers have Christlike concern for one another. Concern demonstrates love and acceptance of the importance of others. Paul expanded on the importance of love and unity in chapter 13. Looking out for the concerns of others reflects the humility and service exemplified by the Lord Jesus Christ (Phil. 2:3-5).

## VERSE 26

**So if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.**

The unity of the human body means that when one part **suffers**, the entire body is impacted. When applied to spiritual unity, this principle means that we should never be apathetic in the body of Christ when others suffer. Sensitivity and mutual care demand concern for the needs of others and a willingness to help in their suffering. This concept challenges many church members today who relate only nominally to others in the congregation.

Equally challenging sometimes can be the matter of rejoicing when others in the body of Christ are **honored**. Envy and selfishness can prevent some believers from celebrating the successes of others. Success for one is success for all in the biblical view of church. Paul will deal with the importance of love in the church congregation in chapter 13.

Paul's instruction regarding spiritual gifts was intended to address wrongs and grievances that had come to his attention. His intention was to focus on the need for unity and mutual respect in the Corinthian church. Sadly, some churches today continue to divide over many of the same issues Paul confronted in the Corinthian church. Paul's overriding emphasis remains an important message for us today: the Spirit distributes one or more spiritual gifts to every believer as He wills so that every Christian contributes significantly to the church's growth. Only as we fulfill our individual responsibilities and acknowledge the necessity of the contributions of others will we make progress as the body of Christ.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

What attitudes in the church today prevent unity? How are sinful distinctions in society sometimes reflected in churches today? In light of this session, what can we do to promote greater unity in our churches?

# UNDERSTANDING LOVE

Believers are to be motivated by love when serving others.

Human life advanced dramatically with the invention of the internal combustion engine. As the term implies, an internal combustion engine produces power by tiny, controlled explosions of fuel that move pistons up and down. The pistons in turn move dozens of metal parts that are in contact with one another to produce power for cars, lawnmowers, and many other machines. The contact of so many metal parts also creates the greatest danger to the engine—friction and heat. Extreme heat can warp the metal parts and thus damage the engine's efficiency. Consequently, engineers designed cavities for oil to flow around the moving parts. Oil reduces friction and dissipates the heat, thereby extending a machine's endurance.

Similarly, the Lord's church has many moving parts (believers) that interact with one another. Paul confronted the problems caused by friction among believers in the church at Corinth. Anger and jealousy resulted in divisions, lawsuits, and other quarrels. The Corinthian church lacked the essential component that would enable them to live, work, and worship in harmony: Christlike love.

This session focuses on one of the most familiar chapters in all of Scripture. First Corinthians 13 has been called “the love chapter.” May we discover fresh insight from it that strengthens our churches and families today.

## UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

### 1 CORINTHIANS 13:1–14:40; 16:1–24

Between his call for unity and diversity (chap. 12) and a challenge to maintain orderly proclamation of the gospel in congregational worship (chap. 14), Paul focused squarely on the priority of Christlike love (chap. 13). The answer

for all the problems facing the Corinthian church was for Christians to understand, embrace, and demonstrate *agape*-love. New Testament writers, including Paul, used the Greek term *agape* [ah GAH pay] in reference to the self-giving, compassionate, forgiving, and redemptive love that Christ both demonstrated and commanded His followers to show toward one another.

In 13:1-3, Paul addressed the essential nature of love. He declared that a person who excelled in knowledge, abilities, and sacrifices achieves nothing of real consequence if he or she lacks love as the primary motivation.

In 13:4-7, Paul described what love believes and how love acts. Paul's description of love in effect characterizes God's love for us. The divine attribute of love differs significantly from worldly ideas of love.

In 13:8-13, Paul spoke of the permanence of love. Many of the abilities and spiritual gifts so highly prized in the Corinthian church were temporary. Paul emphasized that Christlike love endures forever.

In 14:1-40, Paul returned to the matters of spiritual gifts and church order. He rebuked the Corinthians for allowing unintelligible speech to disrupt their worship gatherings. He emphasized that edification occurs when worshipers understand what is being proclaimed. He reiterated the teaching that God gave believers spiritual gifts to benefit others, not for self-promotion.

In 16:1-24, Paul gave final instructions and provided information about future visits to Corinth that he and others planned to make. He encouraged the Corinthians to regularly collect offerings for the impoverished church of Jerusalem so that the money would be ready when he arrived.

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

### NECESSITY OF LOVE (1 Cor. 13:1-3)

At the conclusion of his instruction regarding spiritual gifts in chapter 12, Paul added this intriguing segue: "And I will show you an even better way" (12:31b). He then launched into an exalted description of *agape*-love—the unique quality that Jesus Christ declared would be the distinguishing mark of His followers (see John 13:35).

#### VERSE 1

**If I speak human or angelic tongues but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.**

Some of the Corinthian believers highly valued the spiritual gift Paul referred to as "different kinds of tongues" (12:10). Those who practiced this mysterious gift apparently boasted of their abilities. In a rebuke to those

Christians, Paul asked them to imagine someone who was able to speak in either **human or angelic tongues**. The phrase *human ... tongues* probably referred to the many languages and dialects spoken by people groups on earth. The phrase *angelic tongues* likely referred to the unintelligible speech some believers uttered during the Corinthians' worship gatherings—speech that required an interpreter to translate into a known language. Paul used these two phrases to indicate the complete spectrum of languages, from earthly to heavenly. If some believers had command of the entire spectrum of speech but used this remarkable gift only for self-promotion, then they were about as helpful to Christ's body as **a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal**.

For the first of nine times in 1 Corinthians 13, Paul used the Greek term *agape* [ah GAH pay] to designate the kind of **love** that characterizes God's redeemed people. First-century Greek contained several words that referred to different kinds of affection. Paul and other New Testament writers almost exclusively used *agape* to describe the love that is an attribute of God (Rom. 5:5; 1 John 2:5). *Agape*-love stood apart from other kinds of affection in that it led to giving oneself sacrificially for the benefit of others.

## VERSE 2

**If I have the gift of prophecy and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so that I can move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing.**

As he made clear in 1 Corinthians 14:1, Paul considered **the gift of prophecy** to be the most desirable spiritual gift. This gift included the ability to foretell divinely caused events and to speak (forth-tell) God's specific message to His people for particular circumstances. Accordingly, Paul affirmed that God gave a believer with the gift of prophecy the ability to **understand all mysteries and all knowledge**. We should not view such understanding as the omniscience only God possesses. Paul knew, however, that some of the Corinthians boasted of their knowledge (8:1-2).

Likewise, some of the Corinthians boasted of having a superior level of **faith** than their weaker brothers and sisters in the church. Paul asked them to imagine having the miraculous, mountain-moving faith that Jesus depicted in Matthew 17:20. But here was the clincher: if believers understood *all mysteries* and had *all faith* but did not also have Christlike **love** motivating and directing those abilities, they amounted to **nothing**.

## VERSE 3

**And if I give away all my possessions, and if I give over my body in order to boast but do not have love, I gain nothing.**

Paul's description of the essential nature of love reaches its climax in this verse. He asked the Corinthians to imagine someone who gave away all his **possessions**. Very few people would be willing to give everything away. Paul did not indicate the reason behind this radical act. However, the Greek verb rendered **give away** literally means "to feed with morsels." Thus, some Bible translations (KJV, NIV) understand this phrase to describe an act of generosity toward the poor. In any case, Paul went on to describe an even more radical act of self-sacrifice.

The phrase **give over my body** reflects a willingness to endure physical pain, hardship, and even martyrdom. Based on different ancient manuscripts, Bible translations differ on the sufferer's motivation or reason for sacrificing his body. The Christian Standard Bible (see also the NIV) indicates the act is done **in order to boast**. Other translations (KJV, ESV) indicate the reason is "to be burned"—in other words, to die as a martyr. In the context of Paul's emphasis in 1 Corinthians 13:1-3, either reading points to a radical act of self-sacrifice. Again, however, if people commit such radical acts as giving away all possessions or giving up their bodies to abuse **but do not have love**, they **gain nothing**. Without Christlike love, all abilities are useless, and all rewards are lost.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

What does it look like today for a believer to demonstrate a spiritual gift without love? With love? How can we as believers make certain that our motives are pure when we help others in Jesus' name?

## NATURE OF LOVE (1 Cor. 13:4-7)

Having established the supremacy of love in the Christian life, Paul next described the essential characteristics of *agape*-love. While these characteristics of love can apply to all relationships, Paul mainly had in mind the relationships of Christians with one another.

### VERSES 4-5

**Love is patient, love is kind. Love does not envy, is not boastful, is not arrogant, is not rude, is not self-seeking, is not irritable, and does not keep a record of wrongs.**

In his description of love ("charity," KJV), Paul told us what love is and what love is not. Christlike love is not just an emotion. It includes both attitudes

and actions. The source of *agape*-love is God Himself. Love is a divine attribute that He revealed in His actions and His Word.

**Love is patient** (“suffereth long,” KJV). We could easily substitute God’s name in this and each subsequent declaration. In the Old Testament, the Lord God is said to be “slow to anger”—that is, patient—in His dealings with His people (Ex. 34:6; Num. 14:18). In contrast to God’s patient nature, some believers within the Corinthian community were quick to respond to others with anger and arrogance. Love recognizes that we are all imperfect and that we should extend patience toward others, knowing that we desire others to be patient with us.

**Love is kind.** The phrase *is kind* translates a Greek verb, suggesting that Christlike kindness is more than a feeling. God’s kindness includes His showing mercy to sinners by sending Jesus Christ to save us through His atoning death on the cross. Too many of the Corinthians harbored unforgiving attitudes toward their fellow believers. They had accepted God’s kindness in salvation but were unwilling to show His kindness to others.

**Love does not envy.** The Greek verb translated *envy* is sometimes used in a positive sense meaning “to seek or pursue” (1 Cor. 12:31). Here the word clearly refers to the sinful attitude of coveting what another has (Acts 7:9). In chapter 3, Paul said that he knew many of the Christians at Corinth were worldly because of their “envy and strife” (1 Cor. 3:3). They were following the sinful, worldly nature rather than the Spirit of God. Love is content with what God gives and celebrates the diversity of gifts in the body of Christ. Envy of another’s wealth, leadership, spiritual gift, or other possessions can fracture any church’s unity.

Love **is not boastful** (“vaunteth not itself,” KJV). Paul confronted this sin also in previous passages (1 Cor. 1:29-31; 3:21). The conversations of some believers in Corinth became bragging contests regarding their knowledge and spiritual abilities. Paul reminded them that they could claim no credit for accomplishments, because without God they could do nothing (1 Cor. 4:7).

Love **is not arrogant** (“not puffed up,” KJV; “not proud,” NIV). Paul previously warned that knowledge without humility could easily lead to sinful pride (8:1). His warning should cause all Christians to examine their motives in ministry. Our motivations are not always obvious to others, but they are always clear to God. Love is always humble, directing praise to God.

Love **is not rude** (“doth not behave itself unseemly,” KJV; “does not dishonor others,” NIV). This Greek word refers to behavior that is immoral or indecent. Paul used the term in Romans 1:27 to refer to homosexual behavior. Christians ought never to paper over behavior God forbids by referring to it as a form of love. Paul may have had in mind the list of immoral activities mentioned in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10.

Love **is not self-seeking**. That is, it is not conceited. Paul previously encouraged believers to do only those things that would build up the faith of fellow believers (10:23-24). Some Christians in Corinth used their freedom in Christ to eat food that had been sacrificed to idols. They did not care that their actions might harm the faith of other Christians who saw such actions as sinful. Christlike love always considers the spiritual impact an action might have on brothers and sisters in Christ.

Today's strong emphasis on personal rights often fails to take into account the importance of shared responsibility for one another. Paul's admonition in Romans 14:21 captures the self-sacrificing spirit of God's love: "It is a good thing not to eat meat, or drink wine, or do anything that makes your brother or sister stumble." The Christian life is not about maximizing our personal freedom but about helping others grow spiritually. Love is willing to sacrifice personal freedoms when doing so builds up the faith of a brother or sister in Christ. The greatest example of this principle, of course, was Jesus Christ (Phil. 2:4). We are never more like Christ than when we graciously limit our freedoms to help others.

Love **is not irritable** ("not easily provoked," KJV; "not easily angered," NIV). This characteristic describes someone who refuses to respond in anger to others. Evidently, some of the Corinthian believers harbored a great deal of anger. Spiritual immaturity and quick tempers threatened the unity and gospel outreach of the church. Divisions in the church over leaders and lawsuits filed against other believers were two examples of how anger threatened the Corinthians' unity.

More than a few church splits today can be traced to church members throwing around angry words at one another. Most splits do not occur because of legitimate differences regarding biblical doctrine but rather because of personal disagreements involving preferences or church control. Genuine love equips Christians to maintain civility and unity even when there are differences of opinion.

Love **does not keep a record of wrongs**. The Greek verb rendered *keep a record* can refer to mathematics or accounting. The forgiveness God gives believers in Christ Jesus means that our sins are not counted against us (2 Cor. 5:19). Sadly, we sometimes do not give fellow believers the same forgiveness we receive. In the heat of disagreements, we may dredge up old charges against a person. Paul said that Christlike love refuses to do that.

## VERSE 6

### **Love finds no joy in unrighteousness but rejoices in the truth.**

While the final two characteristics of love mentioned in this verse are not exactly opposites, Paul contrasted them with the use of a conjunction.

**Love finds no joy in unrighteousness.** The Greek word rendered *unrighteousness* is used in several ways in the New Testament. Paul used the word at times to describe the sinful acts of fallen human beings in his description of human depravity (Rom. 1:18). Here he may have had in mind the acceptance by some Corinthian Christians of the immorality prevalent in the city's pagan culture (see 1 Cor. 5). A similar condemnation is found in Romans 1:32, a passage in which Paul rebuked those who "applaud others" practicing immorality.

The term rendered *unrighteousness* could also refer to unjust behavior. If this is the emphasis in 1 Corinthians 13:6, then Paul may have had in mind the practice of some Corinthian believers of filing lawsuits against fellow Christians in the secular courts. Paul pointed out the sad irony of Christians asking pagans to decide for them what was right and just. Paul urged the believers to work out their differences in a Christlike way among themselves. Love seeks reconciliation and will even suffer an unfair loss if doing so brings glory to Christ before a lost world.

Regarding the words *no joy in*, some Bible scholars suggest that Paul was specifically rebuking legalistic-minded Christians who seem to find joy in condemning others for their actions. Others view the phrase as more of a general rebuke of those who accept or celebrate evil. Some unbelievers appear to be entertained by evil; they find many aspects of sin to be comical. Believers, however, are not to laugh at evil but hate it. Paul's statement is a condemnation of carnal Christians who were entertained by corrupt concepts, words, and images in the environment.

Love **rejoices in the truth.** The direct opposite of unrighteousness would be righteousness, or justice. *Truth* is a more comprehensive term and finds its ultimate meaning as an attribute of God (see Ps. 31:5). Here the term rendered *truth* clearly has a moral connotation and refers to all that is good according to God's provision (Jas 1:17). All sin is built upon lies. Evil exists as a perversion of that which is good. Therefore, love recognizes what is true and embraces truth because of its connection to a holy, faithful God.

We as believers rejoice in God's Word because it is truth (John 17:17). We rejoice in Christ because He is the truth (John 14:6). We rejoice in the Holy Spirit because He leads us into all the truth (John 16:13). Love embraces the gospel truth and everything that is connected with God's will for our lives.

## VERSE 7

**It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.**

Paul added four positive characteristics of love in this verse. The repeated

use of the phrase **all things** alongside each verb demonstrates the limitless nature of love.

Love **bears all things**. The Greek verb rendered *bears* can refer to putting up with difficulties (1 Cor. 9:2). To distinguish it from the fourth verb in this verse, some Bible scholars suggest that *bears* puts an emphasis on comprehensiveness, while the fourth verb puts an emphasis on duration. In either case, love puts up with a lot of difficulties for as long as it takes!

Love **believes all things, hopes all things**. For Paul, the two verbs rendered *believes* and *hopes* joined with the quality of Christlike love to form the ultimate triad of virtues for Christ's followers (see 13:13). Love keeps on believing despite discouraging circumstances of all kinds. Hope has the aspect of being certain that God will keep His promises to His people.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Love" on pages 1031–1032 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How would you complete this sentence: "Love means ..." In what way is love the authentic test of Christian discipleship?

## PERMANENCE OF LOVE (1 Cor. 13:8-13)

In this final section of Paul's description of *agape*-love, the apostle returned to the theme of spiritual gifts. In 13:1-3, Paul declared that spiritual gifts must be motivated and directed by love. Here Paul emphasized the permanence of love in contrast to the temporary nature of spiritual gifts.

### VERSE 8

**Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end.**

The statement **love never ends** sets the theme of these final verses. The verb translated *ends* literally means "to fall." Here it refers to the permanent standing of the greatest moral virtue. The Corinthians prized the spiritual gifts of **prophecies, tongues, and knowledge**. As great and mysterious as those spiritual gifts might seem, they are destined to come to an end.

Paul was focusing here on the eschatological changes that will occur following the return of Jesus Christ. Today, Christians are to use their spiritual gifts to honor Christ and help build up the faith of His people.

Following Christ's return, however, nearly all spiritual gifts will have fulfilled their purposes. Paul stated that love was a gift that continues eternally.

#### **VERSES 9-10**

**For we know in part, and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will come to an end.**

Paul provided a further explanation of his claim in the previous verse that prophecy would one day come to an end. The phrases **we know in part** and **we prophesy in part** point to the limited capacity of human knowledge in the present age. God has revealed great truths to us through the inspired biblical writers. However, there is still much that we do not know. Prophecies contribute to our knowledge about God, but they only provide a part of the greater whole. The good news, according to Paul, is that one day **the perfect** will arrive. When that day comes, **the partial will come to an end.**

Some Bible scholars suggest that Paul spoke here of the completion of the Scriptures. Others propose that he predicted the cessation of the supernatural spiritual gifts in church history. I believe the most likely meaning is that Paul referred to the changes ushered in by Christ's return. At that time the gifts of prophecy and knowledge will no longer be required. Paul revealed in the next two verses the reason they will not need to continue.

#### **VERSE 11**

**When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put aside childish things.**

Paul drew upon the analogy of a child's mental and physical growth over time. He contrasted the way he **spoke, thought, and reasoned** in his childhood with the way he did so as a mature man. As a Christian, Paul now had much greater knowledge of God and wisdom than before. Just as he put away childish ways when he became a man, believers will put away the limitations of this age in the life to come.

#### **VERSE 12**

**For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I will know fully, as I am fully known.**

Paul used an additional analogy to emphasize the eventual cessation of spiritual gifts. Corinth was known for their production of some of the finest

polished bronze mirrors of that day. Paul pointed out that, as believers, we currently see spiritual truth as a blurry **reflection** (“darkly,” KJV; “dimly,” ESV). But one day (after Christ’s return) we will see Christ and His truth **face to face**. Some Bible scholars see a reference to Numbers 12:6-8 in Paul’s analogy. The Greek word translated *reflection* occurs in the Septuagint (an ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament) in Numbers 12:8 to describe the remarkable communication between the Lord and Moses. We see truth as a reflected image, but one day we will see it more clearly.

The words **I will know fully, as I am fully known** do not imply that we will have omniscient knowledge as God does. Rather, our knowledge of God and His truth will not be distorted or perverted by sin. We will not hide behind masks but will be able to be our true selves in Christ.

### VERSE 13

#### **Now these three remain: faith, hope, and love—but the greatest of these is love.**

Bible scholars differ in their views of how the phrase **now these three remain** should be interpreted. The basic question is whether **faith** and **hope** will remain forever in the same way that **love** will. Some of the early church fathers contended that faith and hope, like most of the spiritual gifts, will no longer be required in heaven. More recent scholars point out that faith and hope will be completed in heaven, not ended. They will be joined with *agape*-love as the triad of perfected Christian virtues.

Paul singled out love as **the greatest of these** because the others are dependent on love. Love is more than a moral virtue. Love describes the only right relationship we can ever have with God and others. Faith and hope have their place as qualities of eternal life, but love reigns supreme as the basis of our redemption and transformation into the image of Jesus Christ.

Paul brought his case for the supremacy of love to a conclusion. Christians and churches today are wise to focus on God’s love as the corrective answer to their errors, strength for their relationships, and focus for their mission.

### EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Perfect” on page 1245 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. In what ways do you envision heaven to be a perfect place in the life to come? How are faith, hope, and love enduring qualities both now and in the life to come?

# ENJOYING GOD'S COMFORT

Believers find comfort in knowing that others benefit from and God is honored through their trials.

Many people equate the idea of comfort only with physical ease or satisfaction. Some take that definition a step further. They believe their comfortable lives are a sign of God's favor. Consequently, they equate godliness with the absence of conflict, hardship, or pain. In thinking this way, however, people miss the true meaning of the word *comfort* and distort the comprehensive biblical teaching about suffering. The English word *comfort* derives from a Latin term meaning "strength." True comfort, therefore, is not an absence of hardship but the strength to bear up and prevail amid life's trials.

Paul wrote 2 Corinthians during a time of suffering—both for him and his fellow believers to whom he wrote. The suffering Paul faced at the time came in the forms of persecution from unbelievers and distress from unspiritual believers in the Corinthian church. In the midst of these difficult situations, God provided comfort to Paul and, through Paul, to other believers. In this session, we will explore how Paul comforted the faithful in Corinth and urged them to glorify "the God of all comfort" (2 Cor. 1:3).

## UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

### 2 CORINTHIANS 1:1–2:13

Following Paul's writing of 1 Corinthians, the apostle made what he described as a "painful visit" to Corinth (2 Cor. 2:1). He wrote the church a sorrow-filled letter after that visit (2 Cor. 2:3-4), a letter that evidently was not preserved. In anticipation of a third visit, Paul wrote 2 Corinthians to defend his integrity and ministry as an apostle against false teachers who had gained influence in the Corinthian church.

In 2 Corinthians 1:1-2, Paul began the letter with a Christian greeting. He identified himself as “an apostle of Christ Jesus by God’s will” and indicated that Timothy was with him (perhaps serving as Paul’s scribe). He addressed the letter not only to “the church of God at Corinth” but also to other believers who lived in the region around Corinth. He wished them to have the grace and peace that comes from God.

In 1:3-7, Paul praised God for comforting him in times of persecution and suffering. He explained that God’s comfort equipped him to comfort others in their afflictions. Paul described the sufferings of faithful Christians as sharing in “the sufferings of Christ” (1:5).

In 1:8-11, Paul described an intense period of affliction that he suffered in Asia, the region that included the city of Ephesus. He praised God for his deliverance and thanked the Corinthians for their prayers on his behalf.

In 1:12-14, Paul began a defense of his gospel ministry during his time in Corinth. He had been sincere and pure in all of his declarations of truth to the Corinthians—both in person and in his correspondence.

In 1:15-24, Paul explained a change of plans. He had originally planned to come to Corinth from Ephesus, then visit Macedonia, and afterward return to Corinth for a follow-up visit. He explained that his changed plans were not a result of vacillation but a desire to spare them a harsh confrontation.

In 2:1-4, Paul referred to a previous painful visit that involved disciplinary action against some believers. He wanted to give them time to repent so that his next visit would be more pleasant.

In 2:5-11, Paul described in general terms a disciplinary action by the church toward a disobedient member. The person repented, so Paul urged the church to welcome the repentant member back into the assembly.

In 2:12-17, Paul explained how he changed his plan to go to Troas because of his concern for his coworker Titus. Paul instead went into the region of Macedonia. He emphasized his calling to proclaim Christ wherever he went. Paul stated that believing the gospel of Jesus Christ results in salvation for the believer but rejection of the gospel results in eternal punishment. Paul emphasized his sincerity and integrity in all aspects of his ministry.

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

### **COMFORTED** (2 Cor. 1:3-7)

Paul praised God for His mercy and comfort during times of suffering for Christ’s sake. He reminded the Corinthian believers that God would also comfort them as they faced hardships on account of Christ.

### VERSE 3

## **Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort.**

The Greek word rendered **blessed be** (“praise be,” NIV) serves not only as a declaration of praise but also as a summons. The construction is reminiscent of Old Testament psalms in which a temple leader urged worshipers to praise God together (Ps. 66:20; 68:35). Paul similarly invited the Corinthians to join him in praise of **the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ**. His addition of the phrase *Father of our Lord Jesus Christ* marks the doxology as distinctively Christian and uniquely focused on the one true God who sent His Son Jesus into the world as the promised Messiah.

First-century Jewish worshipers often referred to God as the **Father of mercies**. The phrase pointed to the Lord God as compassionate and slow to anger in dealing with His covenant people (Ex. 34:6). For Christians, God demonstrated His mercy ultimately in sending Jesus Christ to be the Savior of sinners. We could never deserve or earn God’s mercy toward us as sinners; we receive it by grace (see Titus 3:5-7).

The words **God of all comfort** introduce one of Paul’s key themes in 2 Corinthians. The Greek word rendered *comfort* can also mean “encouragement” or “consolation.” Paul used various forms of the word ten times just in 1:3-7. The idea of God’s providing strength to believers in times of suffering connects closely to important messianic prophecies in the Book of Isaiah (40:1; 52:9; 61:2). Luke’s Gospel presents the story of Simeon who was told he would not die until he saw the Messiah (Luke 2:26). Luke described Simeon as a man who was “righteous and devout, looking forward to Israel’s consolation” (2:25). The idea that the Messiah would bring comfort and consolation to God’s covenant people was an important expectation of Jews who looked forward to His appearance.

The term *comfort* plays an important role in Jesus’ description of the Holy Spirit. In His upper-room discourse, Jesus promised His disciples that the Father would send to them “another Counselor” to be with them forever (John 14:16). The Greek word rendered “Counselor” comes from the same root word for comfort that Paul used multiple times in 2 Corinthians 1:3-7. Thus, Jesus fulfilled the promise of the Messiah-Comforter, and the Holy Spirit came upon believers at Pentecost to continue Christ’s ministry of comfort to believers.

Later in 2 Corinthians, Paul spoke in greater detail about the sufferings he experienced in Christian ministry. Here, however, he simply praised God for the comfort he received during those trials. Moreover, he encouraged other believers to stand firm in their faith. The same God who strengthened him in times of suffering would also comfort them.

#### VERSE 4

**He comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any kind of affliction, through the comfort we ourselves receive from God.**

Paul revealed in this verse that God's comfort not only strengthened him in times of suffering but also equipped him to better help others. First, Paul stated that God **comforts us in all our affliction**. The word rendered *affliction* ("tribulation," KJV; "troubles," NIV) was a general term that could include experiences of persecution, illness, loneliness, or personal loss.

How does God comfort us in such situations? He provides encouragement through His Word. God's Word provides many examples of how God has helped His people in difficult times. God also strengthens believers through the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit provides strength and intercedes for us before the Father (Rom. 8:26). God comforts us as well by working through other believers in the Christian community (see 2 Cor. 7:6-7,13). The comfort God gives us as believers makes us stronger and wiser. The result is that we are then able to be used by God **to comfort those who are in any kind of affliction**.

As a pastor, I consider that comforting God's people in times of suffering is an important responsibility. In some instances I have not personally faced a particular type of suffering that a church member is enduring. Still, I try to remind the sufferer of the Spirit's presence and the promises in God's Word. In other cases, I too have experienced what a church member is facing. I am then able to empathize with the church member even as I remind the individual (or family) also of God's Word and the Spirit's presence. Paul reminded the Corinthians that, while all true comfort comes from God, believers could and should be channels of God's comfort to one another.

#### VERSE 5

**For just as the sufferings of Christ overflow to us, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.**

What did Paul mean by the words **the sufferings of Christ overflow to us**? We can rule out that he was referring to Christ's atoning death on the cross for our sins. No suffering that we endure has any redemptive power for either ourselves or others. No further atonement for sins is possible or needed; Christ's sacrificial death was complete in both effect and extent (Rom. 5:8-10; 6:10). We can add nothing to Christ's work as the Suffering Servant.

Neither was Paul suggesting that the risen Lord Jesus continues to suffer bodily in heaven while He awaits the time of His return. Instead, Paul was emphasizing that Christians suffer at times because of their faith-

relationship to Christ. Persecution directed toward the church is ultimately directed toward Christ (see Acts 9:4). Paul's point, however, was that the Christ for whom we suffer also is the Christ who will not fail to strengthen us amid suffering. His comfort **overflows** ("share abundantly," ESV; "abounds," NIV) to us. Perhaps the old saying "God will never put on us more than we can bear" is better stated "God will always strengthen us above and beyond any trials we experience."

#### VERSE 6

**If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation. If we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings that we suffer.**

Paul became intensely personal in this verse, referring to his own sufferings and their impact on the Corinthian church. Paul willingly endured afflictions so that the Corinthians might receive God's **comfort and salvation**. Paul's example inspired those in Corinth who later experienced similar kinds of suffering that he had. The result was that the believers were strengthened in their faith and persevered. The term rendered **patient endurance** is not simply the ability to bear up under suffering but also carries the positive connotations of hope and strength in anticipation of a future deliverance. Paul's reference to *salvation* covers the range of the moment of justification, the process of sanctification, and the ultimate possession of glorification.

#### VERSE 7

**And our hope for you is firm, because we know that as you share in the sufferings, so you will also share in the comfort.**

Paul often expressed great concern about the Corinthians' conduct and spirituality, but he never considered them hopeless. His hope for them was **firm** because Paul had confidence God would complete His sanctifying work in them (see Phil. 1:6). Paul knew from experience that they would **share in the comfort** God gives to His people in trials and tribulation.

### EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Suffering" on pages 1510–1511 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What are some examples of trials that Christians today endure because of their faithfulness to Christ? How have you shared in Christ's sufferings?

## TESTED (2 Cor. 1:8-11)

### VERSE 8

**We don't want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, of our affliction that took place in Asia. We were completely overwhelmed—beyond our strength—so that we even despaired of life itself.**

Paul went on to tell the Corinthians about a particular incident in which he and his missionary coworkers suffered on behalf of Christ. The incident **took place in Asia**. The term *Asia* in this context refers not to the modern continent but to a first-century Roman province across the Aegean Sea from Corinth. Paul wrote 1 Corinthians while he was in Ephesus, a major city in the province of Asia.

Some Bible scholars suggest that Paul was referring to an incident described in Acts 19:23-41. In that passage, Luke referred to a “major disturbance about the Way” that occurred while Paul was in Ephesus. An Ephesian craftsman stirred up a mob against Paul and his coworkers for hurting the idol-making business by preaching the gospel. The situation was extremely tense, and believers were in grave personal danger.

Other scholars propose that Paul may have been referring to a serious illness he suffered or to one of the many threats that Jewish opponents made against Paul's life. Whatever the incident was, for Paul it fell under the heading of “the sufferings of Christ” (2 Cor. 1:5). God permitted the incident, but He also comforted Paul, strengthening the apostle's faith.

### VERSE 9

**Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death, so that we would not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead.**

To underscore the seriousness of the incident, Paul admitted that he and his coworkers **felt that they had received the sentence of death**. The Greek word rendered *sentence* is not the usual word for an official judicial decree. Instead, the term referred more often to an ambassador's response to an official inquiry. Thus, Paul may have meant that the missionaries contemplated whether God's will in the incident included their martyrdom. They had readied their hearts for such an eventuality, determining not to trust in their own strength but **in God who raises the dead**.

The difficulties we face in life often threaten consequences of varying severity. A danger that can end in death is serious. Paul believed that a peril he and other believers faced could well result in the end of their earthly service to Christ. He was overwhelmed by the situation and in despair, but he was

not without God's comfort. He had seen the risen Christ and was assured of his own resurrection from the dead through faith in Christ (1 Cor. 15:50-57). Thus, he could face the possibility of death as gain, not loss (Phil. 1:21).

#### VERSE 10

**He has delivered us from such a terrible death, and he will deliver us. We have put our hope in him that he will deliver us again**

Paul next described his deliverance from the aforementioned threat. The specifics of his situation were not as important as the overall theological truth underlying the experience. Paul was no stranger to danger or suffering. He had been delivered from difficulties in the past, and he was confident that God would deliver him from difficulties in the future. God was also referred to as a deliverer in the Old Testament (2 Sam. 22:2; Ps. 18:2; 40:17; 70:5). Paul drew upon this designation for God in Israel's history and applied it to his life as a follower of Christ.

The future tense (**he will deliver us again**) and the mention of **hope** looked forward to the believer's ultimate deliverance at the return of Christ. Paul emphasized the safety that every believer experiences in the divine promise of eternal security. Paul's confidence was similar to the attitudes of Daniel's three friends who refused to bow down before a pagan king's image. These men boldly confessed, "the God we serve ... can rescue us from the furnace of blazing fire, and he can rescue us from the power of you, the king. But even if He does not rescue us, we want you as king to know that we will not serve your gods or worship the gold statue you set up" (Dan. 3:17-18). The three faithful youth trusted that God would deliver them in life or death. They decided to obey the Lord and trust in God's power to save.

#### VERSE 11

**while you join in helping us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gift that came to us through the prayers of many.**

Paul thanked the Corinthians who knew of his ordeal and had offered **prayers** for his deliverance. He stressed the importance of Christian community in facing times of suffering for Christ. Not even Paul could endure these trials without the help of other Christians. The Greek verb translated **join in helping us** reveals that Paul considered their prayers as contributing to the work of his ministry. Similarly, when we pray for missionaries and other Christian leaders today, we share in their work and also in the blessings of their ministries.

Paul emphasized the importance and essential nature of intercessory prayer. Intercessory prayer calls on the Lord to help others in need. God honors such prayers by providing deliverance.

The final sentence of verse 11 is grammatically difficult, but the central truth is clear. The ultimate purpose of Paul's deliverance **through the prayers of many** believers was to bring glory to God. The language paints a word picture of many faces uplifted in prayer, thanking God following Paul's deliverance from death. Paul rejoiced that the gift (his deliverance) had resulted in many Christians having a deeper appreciation for God's love and power. Even in his most difficult struggles, Paul wanted believers to focus on God and give thanks to Him.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

When have you experienced difficulties that could have resulted in death? How did others come to your aid in prayer or help you in ways in addition to praying for you? How have you used that experience to tell others of God's power and your faith in Him?

## ACCEPTED (2 Cor. 1:12-14)

In this section, Paul asked the Corinthians to remember his prior holy conduct among them and his Christian integrity evident in his letters. He called for them to accept him as a proven apostle, even though he had been delayed in his promised visit.

### VERSE 12

**Indeed, this is our boast: The testimony of our conscience is that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you, with godly sincerity and purity, not by human wisdom but by God's grace.**

The Greek word rendered **boast** appears more times in 2 Corinthians than in any other of Paul's letters. In our study of 1 Corinthians, we noted that the immature believers in Corinth were inclined to sinfully boast of their knowledge, spiritual gifts, and importance (1 Cor. 4:7; 5:6). In contrast, Paul boasted of having a clear **conscience** regarding the way he and his missionary coworkers **conducted** themselves **in the world** and especially toward the Corinthian believers. He insisted they had demonstrated **godly sincerity and purity** in all their dealings with the Corinthians.

The Greek word rendered *conscience* refers to a faculty of the mind and spirit that passes judgment on past actions and guides decisions in the present. As a Christian, however, Paul knew that he needed to always submit the findings of his conscience to the Spirit's judgment. He wrote in 1 Corinthians 4:4, "For I am not conscious of anything against myself, but I am not justified by this. It is the Lord who judges me."

Paul further described his and his coworkers' attitudes and behavior toward the Corinthians as **not by human wisdom but by God's grace**. They had no selfish or hypocritical motives that propelled their gospel ministry. Paul used the Greek word rendered *human* ("fleshly," KJV; "earthly," ESV; "worldly," NIV) previously in 1 Corinthians 3:3 to describe the spiritual immaturity of some believers in Corinth. In contrast, Paul lived a life of true spirituality among them that flowed from *God's grace*. He never used worldly tactics to deceive others and manipulate them for personal gain.

### VERSE 13a

**For we are writing nothing to you other than what you can read and also understand.**

Paul's opponents sometimes accused him of writing intentionally obscure statements. The apostle Peter once acknowledged that Paul wrote from a depth of godly wisdom and that some of Paul's opponents twisted his words to their own destruction (2 Pet. 3:15-16). Most Christian writers and teachers then and now have dealt at some point with the frustration of having people distort their words or take them out of context for hurtful reasons. Paul assured the Corinthians that he had no hidden motives or dishonest statements in his letters.

### VERSES 13b-14

**I hope you will understand completely—just as you have partially understood us—that we are your reason for pride, just as you also are ours in the day of our Lord Jesus.**

The words **I hope you will understand completely—just as you have partially understood us** demonstrate that Paul felt that he had not fully addressed all of the issues in the Corinthian church. Prior to writing 2 Corinthians, Paul had received good news from Titus that the Corinthians had repented, disciplined a disobedient member, and desired to restore a good relationship with him (2 Cor. 7:7,9,12-13,16). However, their understanding of his ministry and important spiritual truths was not complete. Paul wanted to increase their knowledge of these matters even more when he visited.

Ultimately, our spiritual knowledge will be completed when we come into the presence of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 13:9-13). Paul urged the Corinthians to anticipate **the day of our Lord Jesus** (Christ's return). On that day there will be a revelation of truth and a judgment of rewards for believers before Christ the Lord. Paul wanted the Corinthians to boast (**your reason for pride**) in him just as he wanted to boast in them on that day. For this to happen, the Corinthians needed to accept Paul's apostolic authority and teachings. The relationship between Paul and some believers in Corinth was not ideal; he hoped through his letter and visit to move toward full reconciliation.

In this opening chapter of 2 Corinthians, Paul wrote following a traumatic experience in his life and ministry. He wanted the Corinthians to know that even though he suffered a serious blow, he saw God's hand in his troubles and was comforted. The Corinthians needed to know that they too could trust God and receive His comfort in times of suffering.

Paul also realized that trusting God amid our times of suffering can help us become better comforters. We are better equipped to understand and help others when they are buffeted by the winds of trials. Paul realized that some lessons can only be learned in the crucible of suffering and that mature character can only be forged in the fiery trials of life. God has not designed us to suffer alone but provides a Christian community of believers to help us in our times of weakness. Paul thanked the Corinthians for their prayers on his behalf. He was focused on giving God the glory for his deliverance.

Paul's entire life was focused on obedience to Christ and fulfilling his calling as an apostle. Paul hoped the Corinthians would recognize his integrity and support him even in the midst of false accusations against him. He looked forward to the return of Christ when they would commend him and he would commend them before the Lord Jesus.

As we face the trials of the Christian life today, may we also be comforted by Paul's message to the Corinthians. The testimonies of faithful saints such as Paul represent God's promises to every faithful believer. God is the Father of mercy and the God of all comfort. He comforts us in all our troubles so that we are better able to comfort others in their times of need.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Conscience" on pages 333–334 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. Do you agree or disagree with the common advice to "always let your conscience be your guide"? Explain your response. What can you, as a believer, do to maintain a healthy, trustworthy conscience?

# DISPLAYING THE GOSPEL

Believers can face life with confidence, knowing that the power of the gospel will be revealed.

“The heavens declare the glory of God, and the expanse proclaims the work of his hands. Day after day they pour out speech; night after night they communicate knowledge” (Ps. 19:1-2). Theologians sometimes refer to the creation as general revelation. The vast beauty and complexity of the creation reveal the invisible Creator who made the heavens and the earth. Paul declared in Romans 1:20-23 that because the creation reveals God’s power and divine nature, we human beings—part of His creation—have no excuse for living as though He doesn’t exist.

God has given us special revelation (the Bible) to understand His personal attributes such as holiness, righteousness, and redemptive mercy. Paul described salvation in Christ as the wonder of God transforming the sinner into a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15). Just as the physical universe reveals the glory of God’s power, Christ’s followers become masterpieces that reveal the Savior’s love and glory in the gospel. The visible creation reveals God’s divine nature; the people of the new creation (Christians) are authorized and privileged to declare the truths of the gospel found in God’s Word. In this session’s Bible passage, we will explore how Paul challenged the Corinthian believers to keep their focus on displaying the gospel through their words and actions.

## UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

### 2 CORINTHIANS 2:14–5:10

In 2 Corinthians 2:14-17, Paul described the joy of sharing the gospel with people. He compared believers to a fragrant aroma, suggesting that to God

they emitted the fragrance of Christ but to unbelievers they became the fragrance of death. Paul denied that he preached the gospel for profit. Rather, he always displayed sincerity and truthfulness in his ministry.

In 3:1-18, Paul described the advantages of the new covenant through Christ in contrast to the old covenant established through Moses. Paul described the new covenant as more glorious than the old and spoke of the transformative power of looking at the glory of God through Jesus Christ.

In 4:1-4, Paul spoke of his perseverance in preaching the glory of Christ. He explained that Satan had blinded those who stubbornly refused to believe the gospel. He declared Jesus Christ to be the image of God.

In 4:5-6, Paul described his ministry as one of preaching a singular message: Christ is Lord. Paul described his own salvation as the light of God shining in his heart through the knowledge of Jesus Christ.

In 4:7-15, Paul recounted some of the sufferings he endured for the sake of preaching the gospel. He acknowledged that God permitted Paul's suffering and used it for the benefit of the Corinthians and other believers. Paul anticipated his death and resurrection by the power of God.

In 4:16-18, Paul repeated his commitment to persevere amid suffering. He viewed his experiences of suffering as brief and light in contrast to the glorious eternal reward that God has planned for His redeemed people.

In 5:1-10, Paul spoke confidently about the new resurrection bodies God promises to give believers in the life to come. The Holy Spirit's presence in believers now serves as God's down payment on that promise. Paul reminded the Corinthians that believers will one day be rewarded for their lives and service as they stand before "the judgment seat of Christ" (5:10).

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

### **PROCLAIM** (2 Cor. 4:5-6)

In chapter 3 Paul declared the superiority of the new covenant in Christ to the old covenant established through Moses (3:10). God had called Paul to preach the good news of Christ, and he was determined not to give up that mission despite opposition and false accusations against him.

### **VERSE 5**

**For we are not proclaiming ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus's sake.**

In defending his apostleship, Paul sought to avoid being perceived as boasting about himself. He assured the Corinthians that he and his missionary team

never sought to promote themselves. The gospel was not about any preacher but about **Jesus Christ as Lord**. Paul did not appoint himself to be an apostle. God had saved him through faith in the risen Christ whom Paul encountered on the road to Damascus. God then called Paul to preach the gospel and sent him especially to the Gentiles. Further, Paul did not invent the gospel message. God entrusted him with it, and he was determined to proclaim it and live it out faithfully without any compromise.

Today's gospel preachers and teachers do well to learn from Paul's example. Self-centered pride can be a subtle and persistent temptation. The faithful proclaimer of the God's Word carefully studies the meaning of Scripture and seeks to avoid distorting biblical truth with personal prejudices or preferences. Further, faithful witnesses to the gospel avoid accepting praise and glory that belong to Christ alone. The gospel is about Christ, not us!

The words *Jesus Christ as Lord* combine two key designations for Jesus in the New Testament. The name *Christ* points to Jesus as the promised Messiah, or "Anointed One," of the Old Testament (see Daniel 9:25-26; Acts 17:2-3). The name *Lord* signifies Jesus' deity and associates Him with the one true God of Israel who promised to establish a new covenant (see Jer. 31:31-34). For Paul, the confession "Jesus Christ is Lord" summed up the heart of the gospel he preached. Everything he said and did in ministry was to uplift and glorify Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

Paul added that the missionaries' willingness to consider themselves as **servants** of the Corinthian believers was ultimately **for Jesus's sake**. Paul poured himself out in ministry and endured severe hardships so that he could bring the message of salvation to lost people. His driving motive in doing this was to honor and obey Christ. He would not bow to the desires of unspiritual Christians; he submitted only to the lordship of Christ.

## VERSE 6

**For God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of God's glory in the face of Jesus Christ.**

In 2 Corinthians 4:4, Paul referred to "the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ" and explained that unbelievers did not acknowledge this light because a false light ("the god of this age") blinded them from the truth. Here in 4:6 Paul used light imagery again, identifying God as the source of true light. While most modern English Bibles put the words **let light shine out of darkness** in quotation marks to indicate a direct quote, the statement likely refers to Genesis 1:3, where the Scripture reads "Then God said, 'Let there be light, and there was light.'" Paul's point was that the same God who

created the universe also revealed His ultimate presence **in the face of Jesus Christ**. The biblical doctrine of creation thus connects inseparably to the doctrine of salvation. The same God who made human beings in His image and breathed into them the breath of life also provided in Jesus Christ the way of new creation and new life for sinners.

The words **shone in our hearts** may well have arisen from Paul's personal testimony of salvation. On his way to Damascus to arrest Christians, "a light from heaven suddenly flashed around him" (Acts 9:3). That light was followed immediately by the commanding and forgiving voice of the risen Lord Jesus that captured Paul's heart and soul.

The biblical concept of enlightenment involves more than an intellectual acquisition of knowledge. The **knowledge of God's glory** comes as a result of a supernatural salvation and infusion of life through the power of the Holy Spirit. As Paul pointed out in 2 Corinthians 3:10, the new covenant is more glorious than the old because of Jesus Christ. Only Moses met face to face with God under the old covenant. Under the new covenant, every believer witnesses the glory of God through faith in Christ. The inner, spiritual light Christ gives believers never fades and should not be hidden (Matt. 5:16).

## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Glory" on pages 647–648 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How would you explain to a new believer what God's glory means? What does it mean to you to have knowledge of God's glory through Jesus Christ?

### LIVE (2 Cor. 4:7-15)

Because of the wonderful light of the gospel God had shone in his heart, Paul did not lose heart. This did not mean, however, that Paul never experienced trials and troubles. He explained that God's extraordinary power kept him going even in the face of opposition, persecution, and life-threatening danger.

### VERSE 7

**Now we have this treasure in clay jars, so that this extraordinary power may be from God and not from us.**

The **treasure** Paul mentioned in this verse points back to the "light of the knowledge of God's glory" in the previous verse. It refers to the totality of blessings we receive through faith in Jesus Christ. The Greek word translated

*treasure* appears also in Jesus' teachings. In the Sermon on the Mount, for example, Jesus instructed His disciples not to store up treasure on earth but rather in heaven (Matt. 6:19-20). In one of His parables, He compared the kingdom of God to a hidden treasure worth sacrificing everything to obtain (13:44). Paul knew that the treasure of which Jesus spoke was to be found in Christ and the key that unlocked the treasure was the gospel message.

The phrase **in clay jars** ("in earthen vessels," KJV; "in jars of clay," ESV, NIV) refers to believers in general and to Paul and his missionary coworkers in particular. *Clay jars* were the common, earthenware containers people used in everyday life. Those vessels did not have great monetary value and could be easily broken. Still, people sometimes stored their prized possessions in such containers. Paul saw in that practice a powerful illustration of what the Lord had done in placing the glorious gospel of Christ in the hearts of believers.

We as believers are weak and fragile containers, easily shattered by trouble, affliction, or persecution. On the other hand, our fragility shines an even brighter light on God's **extraordinary power** ("excellency of the power," KJV; "all-surpassing power," NIV) working in us. Paul wanted the Corinthians to know that it was God's power that sustained and protected him as he proclaimed the treasures of the gospel.

## VERSES 8-9

**We are afflicted in every way but not crushed; we are perplexed but not in despair; we are persecuted but not abandoned; we are struck down but not destroyed.**

In 4:8-9, Paul described in general terms four different kinds of suffering that he and his missionary team had experienced. In every case he highlighted the way God sustained them and enabled them to stay on mission.

First, the team had been **afflicted in every way**. The Greek word rendered *afflicted* ("troubled," KJV; "hard pressed," NIV) literally means "to be pressed or restricted." We have a modern saying with a similar meaning: "I'm between a rock and a hard place." In 11:27-28, Paul recounted having endured "toil and hardship, many sleepless nights, hunger and thirst, often without food, cold, and without clothing." He went on to speak of having "daily pressure" arising from his "concern for all the churches." Despite the weight of all these constant pressures, however, Paul testified that God's power kept him from being **crushed** ("distressed," KJV).

Second, Paul spoke of being **perplexed** at times. The Greek word could refer either to uncertainty about the future or an inability to explain what just happened. Most pastors today can vouch that when church members ask them why some tragedy occurred, they often have to say, "I don't know

why this happened, but I know that God knows and He will help you walk through it.” Paul acknowledged that he did not always understand why certain things happened or what the outcome of a situation would be. Yet, because of the Holy Spirit’s constant presence and power, Paul was never **in despair**. He had a calm assurance that God was in control and would cause “all things to work together for [Paul’s] good” (Rom. 8:28).

Third, Paul spoke of being **persecuted**. The Greek root word behind *persecuted* literally means “to pursue or chase,” depicting a predator chasing a prey. The word accurately depicts the plight of many Christians throughout the centuries who have been hunted down, imprisoned, and even martyred for their faith in Christ. In 2 Corinthians 11:23-25, Paul recounted having been imprisoned numerous times, flogged severely five times, beaten with rods three times, and stoned and left for dead on one occasion. Despite these sufferings, however, Paul testified that God never **abandoned** him.

Fourth, Paul knew what it was like to be **struck down**. This term could refer to unexpected blows of various kinds, whether physical, emotional, or spiritual blows. These are painful, life-changing experiences that can stop us in our tracks—a job loss, a storm, an illness, a loved one’s death, and many other blows. Paul had suffered for Christ more than most believers, certainly more than his detractors, but by God’s “extraordinary power” (4:7) he had not been **destroyed** by any of his sufferings. May we be greatly encouraged by Paul’s example and testimony when we face hardships as believers!

## VERSE 10

### **We always carry the death of Jesus in our body, so that the life of Jesus may also be displayed in our body.**

The word **always** indicates that Paul fully expected to experience trials and hardships as a Christian and gospel proclaimer. He was not surprised by suffering even though he knew that he needed God’s power to endure. Just as he wrote earlier about Christ’s sufferings overflowing to him (1:5), he spoke here of always bearing **the death of Jesus** in his **body**.

The Greek word rendered *death* is not the usual term Paul used. The root word used here may emphasize the process of dying rather than the moment of expiring. It comes over into modern English in terms such as *necrosis*, the deterioration of living tissue. Thus, the phrase *the death of Jesus* represented all that led up to and derived from Jesus’ sacrificial death on the cross for sinners. It was the purpose of Paul’s sufferings. His salvation and life of obedience in spreading the gospel were the reasons Paul willingly and faithfully bore the marks of Jesus’ death in his body (see Gal. 6:17). Jesus calls all of His followers—then and now—to take up the cross and follow Him (Matt. 16:24).

Paul understood that enduring suffering for Christ's sake also powerfully displayed **the life of Jesus** in the believer's life. Just as "the death of Jesus" pointed back to the experiences of being afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down (1 Cor. 4:8-9), the phrase *the life of Jesus* refers to the realities of not being crushed, in despair, abandoned, or destroyed. Every obstacle Paul faced was an opportunity for God to demonstrate his power to deliver. Christ's atoning death and victorious resurrection proved that not even death could separate the Lord and His people (Rom. 8:35-39).

#### VERSE 11

**For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus's sake, so that Jesus's life may also be displayed in our mortal flesh.**

The Greek verb translated **given over** is used elsewhere by Paul to describe the handing over of Jesus for crucifixion (Rom. 4:25; 8:32; Gal. 2:20). Just as suffering was essential to Jesus' substitutionary atonement for our sins on the cross, even so suffering was integral to God's plan for Paul's ministry in sharing the gospel. Jesus died on the cross for our sins. He was resurrected to life by the power of God. Paul experienced suffering so that Jesus' life might be revealed in his **mortal flesh**. The unconquerable life of Jesus sustained Paul in his earthly sufferings. In Christ, all believers will one day be resurrected and given new, immortal bodies and live forever with Him.

#### VERSE 12

**So then, death is at work in us, but life in you.**

The words **so then** indicate that Paul had reached a conclusion in his contrast of death and life. The term **death** (Greek *thanatos*—Paul's usual term for death) refers figuratively to the entirety of Paul's sufferings for Christ. The things Paul had suffered resulted in the Corinthians' hearing and responding to the gospel. In other words, Paul's sufferings helped to bring **life** to the Christians in Corinth. He may have had in mind the positive witness to God's power that the Corinthians saw in God's deliverance of Paul in his times of suffering.

#### VERSE 13

**And since we have the same spirit of faith in keeping with what is written, I believed, therefore I spoke, we also believe, and therefore speak.**

Paul found encouragement in the Scriptures that helped him keep on proclaiming the gospel despite the hardships he faced. The words **I believed**,

**therefore I spoke** are found in Psalm 116:10. In that psalm, the biblical writer spoke of facing unspecified suffering that threatened his life (see 116:3,8,15). The psalmist praised God for delivering him and promised to fulfill his vows of service to the Lord (116:12-14,17-18). We can easily see how the psalmist's words encouraged Paul to display **the same spirit of faith** in his gospel ministry. Like the psalmist, Paul trusted the Lord to deliver him from death. We can trust God too.

#### VERSE 14

**For we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you.**

Paul was neither naive nor presumptuous about the prospect of physical death. God had rescued him from the threat of death on more than one occasion. Eventually, death would overtake him if Christ's return did not happen first. However, the certainty of mortal death produced no fear in Paul, because he trusted in **the one who raised the Lord Jesus**. The gospel certainty that Paul proclaimed was that Christ defeated death. Therefore, God **will also raise** up all who believe in Jesus in the resurrection. The phrase **with Jesus** points to Christ's return when "all who belong to Christ" (1 Cor. 15:23) will be resurrected, transformed, and given their new, spiritual bodies.

#### VERSE 15

**Indeed, everything is for your benefit so that, as grace extends through more and more people, it may cause thanksgiving to increase to the glory of God.**

This verse summarizes Paul's instruction in the previous verses. The word translated **everything** refers to all that Paul had said, done, and suffered to share the gospel with the Corinthians. He did not act selfishly but for the Corinthians' **benefit** and, ultimately, for **the glory of God**. As **more and more people** respond to the gospel of grace with faith in Jesus Christ, **thanksgiving** to God increases—and rightfully so.

### EXPLORE FURTHER

What experiences have you had that convinced you of the weakness and fragility of the human mind, emotions, or body? How did God strengthen or deliver you in those experiences? How can believers glorify God during such experiences?

## FOCUS (2 Cor. 4:16-18)

Paul challenged the Corinthians to focus on the unseen and eternal. He said that doing so would produce an incomparable reward in heaven.

### VERSE 16

**Therefore we do not give up. Even though our outer person is being destroyed, our inner person is being renewed day by day.**

The words **do not give up** render the same Greek verb Paul used in 4:1. He made his case for the believer to persevere amid suffering for Christ in 4:7-15. Here, Paul reiterated his primary reason for courageously declaring the gospel despite many physical and emotional obstacles.

Paul contrasted the **outer person** with the **inner person**. The *outer person* refers to our physical bodies. God created the human body from the dust of the ground, and it returns to that state through decay after death. The Greek verb rendered **being destroyed** appears in Luke 12:33 in reference to the finite nature of earthly possessions. They do not last forever but are subject to decay, loss, and destruction. The longer we live, the more we have to admit that our physical bodies do not last forever either.

Here is the gospel hope: at the same time the believer's *outer person* gets weaker and closer to its demise, the *inner person* is getting stronger and closer to its appearance. It gets **renewed day by day**. The *inner person* is our new life that comes as a result of faith in Jesus Christ as Savior. The reality for Christians is that we they can grow spiritually stronger every day even as our physical bodies lose strength and health. Paul could look at his physical scars and feel the pain associated with past sufferings for Christ, but he was encouraged, knowing that inwardly he was gaining strength.

### VERSE 17

**For our momentary light affliction is producing for us an absolutely incomparable eternal weight of glory.**

Paul used two words to describe the suffering he experienced in service to Christ. First, it was **momentary**. He did not mean that his suffering lasted only a short time. Rather, he was comparing the few years of suffering on earth to everlasting life in heaven. It was like comparing a rain drop to an ocean. Paul believed God's promise of eternal life. Consequently, that confidence strengthened him in the face of his sufferings for Christ.

Second, Paul described his suffering as **light**, meaning not heavy, not substantive. Again, he described his **affliction** in these terms in comparison to God's **absolutely incomparable eternal weight of glory**. Paul suffered

numerous beatings, a stoning, and a shipwreck (2 Cor. 11:25). Few believers have had to endure the degree of suffering Paul endured for Christ. However, all of our suffering as believers combined cannot begin to approach the suffering Jesus endured on our behalf on the cross.

Paul's statement points to the need for Christians to develop a proper attitude regarding suffering. If God's purposes for His own Son included suffering, we should not expect that His plan for our lives would omit suffering. We must not let the difficult paths we walk in life discourage us or weaken our resolve to serve the Lord wholeheartedly. At the end of our limited, earthly suffering will be an eternal, unlimited reward of life with Him in heaven!

## VERSE 18

**So we do not focus on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.**

Nowhere is Paul's perspective on life better expressed than here when he said **we do not focus on what is seen, but on what is unseen**. Unbelievers make the visible things of this world the object of their desires. God's people can focus on invisible treasure that is seen and obtained by faith in Jesus Christ. The great realities of the Spirit are invisible to our physical eyes. This is why the Scriptures say that without faith it is impossible to please God (Heb. 11:6).

The phrase *what is seen* refers to what can be seen with the human eye in the present life. All of the joys, treasures, and objects of desire this world offers fill our field of view. One word describes them all: **temporary**. Like our physical bodies, they do not last beyond this life.

The Christian, on the other hand, focuses on *what is unseen*, because these realities remain forever. Worldly fortunes are no more lasting than sand castles built near the water's edge at low tide. Wise believers know that death eventually comes and washes away from the foolish all of their temporary possessions. Faithful Christians invest their faith and resources in serving Christ on earth in anticipation of the invisible and eternal treasures promised to them by God.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Time, Meaning of" on pages 1571–1572 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What is God's relationship to time? How are believers held accountable for their time on earth? What is eternity and how does it compare to the present time?

# BECOMING NEW

Believers faithfully represent Christ by living as new creations reconciled to Him.

After nearly twenty years, Mary and John decided to end their troubled marriage. Angry confrontations had created deep wounds. The flame of love they once shared had long been extinguished. Both had contacted lawyers and soon would begin the legal steps to divorce. Concerned friends in their church encouraged the couple to seek the help of a Christian counselor before ending their marriage. Both reluctantly agreed, although neither John nor Mary thought that seeing a counselor would make a difference.

In their initial sessions, the counselor methodically probed for the sources of John and Mary's problems that had developed over a period of years. He exposed the root problems and demonstrated to the couple how they could be reconciled. He taught them important biblical principles of marriage and helped them reopen communication lines that had closed. The process took months, but John and Mary rediscovered their love for each other and committed to renewing their relationship.

Right relationships have a greater value by far than any material possessions. When God uses His people to help salvage broken relationships, He engages us in a labor that reveals His love. In this session, we will explore the supreme example of reconciliation. God sent His Son Jesus into the world to provide the way of reconciliation for sinners. Through faith in Jesus Christ, sinners can be restored to a right relationship with God.

## UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

### 2 CORINTHIANS 5:11–7:16

Paul reminded the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 5:10 that one day every believer would stand before Christ and give an account of his or her life and service to Him. That reality motivated Paul to spend the remainder of his life trying to persuade people to believe the gospel. Christ's love compelled

Paul to keep proclaiming the crucified and risen Lord despite what people thought of him. In 5:11-15, Paul testified that in anticipation of giving an account to Jesus, he served the Lord and the Corinthians from the heart.

In 5:16-17, Paul said that everything changed in his life and perspective after salvation. He experienced a supernatural transformation in Christ. The old, self-righteous Paul was gone; he was a new creation in Christ.

In 5:18-21, Paul described the death of Christ as God's provision for the reconciliation of lost people to God. Paul's calling therefore was to be engaged in a ministry of reconciliation. Sin had broken the relationship between human beings and God. God sent Jesus to die on the cross, thereby providing a basis for forgiveness of sins and making reconciliation possible. Those who believe in Jesus as Savior receive forgiveness and reconciliation. They also become ambassadors of Christ and messengers of the gospel.

In 6:1-2, Paul urged all who hear the gospel to embrace it. He quoted a messianic prophecy from the Book of Isaiah to declare that the promise of salvation came when God sent His Son, Jesus Christ.

In 6:3-13, Paul continued his defense of his ministry as an apostle. He declared that while he faced many challenges in his ministry, God helped him through every difficulty. He testified that God's power alone made his ministry effective.

In 6:14-7:1, Paul urged believers not to enter into relationships with unbelievers that might result in moral compromise. Paul drew upon Old Testament warnings to the people Israel in counseling New Testament believers about the consequences of disobeying God.

In 7:2-16, Paul returned to the defense of his ministry and offered praise for the Corinthians' repentance following a letter of rebuke he had sent them. Titus had brought news of the Corinthians' response to Paul in Macedonia, and Paul commended them for their godly sorrow and true repentance.

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

### **REBORN** (2 Cor. 5:16-17)

Paul described salvation in Christ in terms of being created anew. The old, guilty self passes away. The believer becomes a new creation.

#### **VERSE 16**

**From now on, then, we do not know anyone from a worldly perspective. Even if we have known Christ from a worldly perspective, yet now we no longer know him in this way.**

The phrase **from now on** points back to the life transformation that happened when Paul believed in Jesus Christ. Christ's atoning death on the cross changed everything for Paul (and for all who believe). His life no longer was self-centered but Christ-centered (5:15). In light of this transformation, Paul viewed other people differently too. The phrase **worldly perspective** describes Paul's attitude and beliefs about life that he held before his conversion. The phrase literally reads "according to the flesh" and depicts the opposite of the spiritual life. Unbelievers reject the Holy Spirit and therefore are unable to grasp the things of God (see 1 Cor. 2:10-16).

Before his conversion, Paul viewed Jesus from that same *worldly perspective*. He refused to accept that Jesus was the Son of God, the promised Messiah. Instead, he considered Jesus to be a blasphemer and liar who was rightly crucified for claiming to be divine. Paul further believed that he, not Jesus, was doing God's will. He zealously persecuted those who disagreed with his false understanding of Jesus. Then came his encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, and Paul's perspective was radically transformed. The human way that once characterized Paul's understanding of Jesus was changed into a true saving relationship with the Lord.

Many unbelievers today do not have the violently negative view of Jesus that Paul had before his conversion. Nevertheless, they have a *worldly perspective*. They view Jesus as a good man, a wise teacher, or just another founder of an ancient religion. Like Paul before his encounter with the risen Lord, they do not view Jesus as divine. Neither do they believe in Him as Savior and Lord. All of those worldly perspectives would fade away, however, in the moment they turned to Jesus and received the forgiveness and new life He gives to those who believe. Everything would be transformed!

## VERSE 17

**Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, and see, the new has come!**

Paul explained salvation in terms of being created anew. The word **therefore** points to a conclusion that follows from the previous discussion of the believer's transformed perspective about Christ. Verse 17 opens with a conditional clause followed by a result statement. That is, if the condition is met, then the result will follow. Two additional, clarifying statements then follow the result statement, describing the result statement from two vantage points. Paul wanted believers to have a full grasp of the transformation that occurs in salvation.

Let's explore deeper each part of this wonderful verse. First, Paul expressed a condition: **if anyone is in Christ**. To be *in Christ* means to be

saved by believing in Jesus Christ as God's Son and Savior. People are not saved by their family heritage or good works, as commendable as these might be. God offers the benefits of salvation to all people, but only those who receive salvation by faith in Christ obtain those benefits. Some Bible scholars consider the phrase *in Christ* to be the key to Paul's theology of salvation. The phrase positionally describes someone who is a part of Christ's body, the church (see Rom. 12:5). The general term *anyone* refers to both Jews and Gentiles who are saved and united in the body of Christ (see Gal. 3:28; 5:6).

Second, Paul expressed the certain result when a person is saved: **he is a new creation.** The Greek term rendered *new creation* appears in only one other place in Paul's writings, Galatians 6:15. The death of Jesus on the cross inaugurated a new covenant (1 Cor. 11:25; 2 Cor. 3:6). The word *new* also points to the end times when God will bring about "a new heaven and a new earth" (Rev. 21:1). The description of the believer as a *new creation* was Paul's way of pointing to a supernatural transformation that occurs at the moment of conversion. It implies that salvation is God's work in the believer, not the believer's own accomplishment.

Third, Paul clarified the meaning of the phrase *new creation* from the standpoint of the believer's former life: **the old has passed away.** The phrase rendered *the old* refers to the unbeliever's self-focused, worldly perspective, actions, and way of life. That old life is characterized by guilt, sin, and alienation from God. The Greek verb rendered *has passed away* ("has gone," NIV) literally means "to go past, pass by" but figuratively means "to pass away, perish." Paul came to realize that in Christ his former perspective, actions and way of life—all of which were characterized by guilt, sin, and alienation from God—were gone forever! It was as if the old Paul had died and a new Paul had been born. The changes are so profound that the Christian life is truly a new creation, a new beginning.

Fourth, Paul clarified the phrase *new creation* from the standpoint of the believer's new life: **the new has come!** The Greek word rendered *new* can mean "recently made, fresh, unused, of a new kind." It emphasizes transformation from without, not reformation from within. In other words, God makes believers into new people with new relationships with Him and others.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "New Birth" on pages 1158–1159 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How does the phrase "new birth" accurately describe salvation in Christ? As a believer, for what are you most thankful that the Lord has made new about you?

## RECONCILED (2 Cor. 5:18-21)

In defending his ministry, Paul pointed to God as the sole source of salvation. Paul viewed his salvation and appointment to ministry as a part of God's eternal plan.

### VERSE 18

**Everything is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.**

The phrase **everything is from God** summarizes Paul's declaration that salvation is a spiritual transformation accomplished by God alone. The word translated *everything* can refer to the created universe. In this context, however, it signifies every element of salvation. Because salvation is God's work alone, it cannot be attributed to the person who is saved. Salvation is a gift from God to those who believe in Jesus Christ (Rom. 6:23).

Paul stated that God **has reconciled us to himself through Christ**. Among the various New Testament writers, only Paul used the language of reconciliation to describe the salvation experience. The verb rendered *has reconciled* means "to change" or "to exchange." In the ancient Greek world of trade, the term referred to currency exchange. Paul used the term to describe a change of relationship between God and sinful humanity.

Human sin created a chasm of separation and enmity between a holy God and humankind (Rom. 5:10; Col. 1:21). God initiated the act of reconciliation by providing His Son Jesus as the perfect sacrifice for sinners. Therefore, we talk not about God's being reconciled to us but about sinners being reconciled to God. Christ's atoning death on the cross puts away our guilt as sinners and establishes a new relationship of peace with God (Rom. 5:1).

Paul further asserted that his calling as an apostle included **the ministry of reconciliation**. This too was God's gift. God had taken the initiative not only to reconcile sinners to Himself through Christ but also to send out the gospel message of salvation to the world through believers. We who have been reconciled to God through faith in Christ are commissioned to appeal to everyone else in the world to be reconciled to God.

### VERSE 19

**That is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and he has committed the message of reconciliation to us.**

The Greek phrase translated **that is** signifies that Paul wanted to be sure the Corinthians understood what he said in verse 18. God was not seeking to

reconcile only the Jews to Himself but indeed **the world**. In this context, the term rendered **world** refers to people “from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9). This does not mean that everyone in the world will be saved (universalism). It means, rather, that salvation is possible for everyone in the world. God had all people in mind when He sent Jesus into the world as the Savior. Those who believe in Jesus receive the gift of being reconciled to the God who loves us. Those who reject Jesus remain lost.

The phrase **not counting their trespasses against them** describes the power of Christ’s death on the cross to cancel our sin debt. The Greek word translated *trespasses* describes intentional violations of God’s moral laws. Christ’s atoning death covers both intentional and unintentional sins. There could be no reconciliation with a holy God without the forgiveness of our sins.

The idea that God **has committed the message of reconciliation to us** further points to God as the One who calls believers such as Paul to declare the gospel to the people of the world. The truths of the gospel can only be grasped through the Spirit’s help. Those present at the cross saw Jesus die, but the Holy Spirit guided Jesus’ followers (and us) to understand the saving power of Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection.

## VERSE 20

**Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us. We plead on Christ’s behalf: “Be reconciled to God.”**

Paul described himself and all who carry the message of reconciliation to the world as **ambassadors for Christ**. The Greek term rendered *ambassadors* has important implications. Believers are citizens of two kingdoms. That is, we are citizens on earth by virtue of our births to human parents. When we receive the new birth through faith in Christ, we also become citizens of God’s kingdom (see Eph. 2:19; Phil. 3:20). Our citizenship in God’s kingdom is primary; therefore, we are God’s ambassadors to those who only have an earthly citizenship.

Ambassadors are empowered by the ruler who sends them. The Great Commission speaks of believers who are given authority by Christ to go into the world (Matt. 28:18). Ambassadors do not deliver their own messages. Instead, they carry the words and intents of their nation’s leader. As believers, therefore, we have been commissioned by Christ to take the gospel to the ends of the earth and make disciples who follow Him (Matt. 28:19-20).

Bible scholars have interpreted the final words of 2 Corinthians 5:20, **be reconciled to God**, in different ways. At issue is the identity of the recipients of Paul’s letter. Some interpreters believe the Corinthians are intended.

However, why would Paul urge believers to *be reconciled to God*? Perhaps he wanted to emphasize that their present conduct was not in harmony with their profession of faith in Christ. Other interpreters believe this message is a universal one for all unbelievers. Paul had already said that he was an ambassador for Christ. His passionate appeal to all unbelievers was for them to respond to God's offer of salvation with faith in Jesus Christ.

The call for reconciliation to God is the gospel in a nutshell. However, Paul's words in these verses also remind us of the need for reconciliation in human relationships as well. Helping married couples work through their troubles and find reconciliation is an important aspect of Christian ministry. Reconciling opposing parties in a church is essential to unity and effectiveness for a church. Paul urged the believers in Philippi to help reconcile two individuals in their church (Phil. 4:2-3). When we work to restore proper relationships, we engage in a work that God blesses.

## VERSE 21

### **He made the one who did not know sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.**

Paul continued his focus on God's provision for our reconciliation. The phrase **the one who did not know sin** refers to Jesus Christ. The point is not that Jesus was unaware of sin. He endured the same kinds of temptations that every human being faces (Heb. 4:15). The point is, rather, that Jesus never sinned and was not born with the guilt of Adam's sin.

What does it mean, however, that God made the sinless Jesus **to be sin for us**? Some ancient Christian commentators interpreted this phrase in reference to Jesus' sacrificial death as a sin offering. Indeed, Jesus' death is described in the New Testament in terms of a sacrifice (see Rom. 8:3; 1 Cor. 5:7). Many evangelical Bible scholars today emphasize that the simplest meaning of the text is that Jesus bore the full punishment for our sins. The suffering of Jesus was not just His physical death but the bearing of our sin and punishment on the cross.

The phrase *for us* further raises a question as to whether Christ's death was representative or substitutionary. If it was representative, then His death achieved benefits for us that we could never achieve for ourselves. If the phrase *for us* emphasizes a substitutionary death, it means that our sins and guilt were transferred onto Jesus when He died on the cross. He took the penalty we deserved and died the death that should have been ours. Because He was sinless, He exchanged His righteousness for our sinfulness. By faith, therefore, we receive His **righteousness** (right standing with God) and our sin debt is forgiven.

While we have dealt with the vocabulary and theological concepts of this important verse, we must humbly admit that the description of God's provision through the death of His Son is a mystery that we can't fully understand. We can only marvel at the love of God who sent His Son to be our substitute in death and punishment. We should be filled with gratitude to the Savior, Jesus Christ, who did not sin yet took our sin on Himself. These concepts demonstrate the unique truths that separate Christianity from every other world religion and philosophy. Every hope that we have centers in the work and provision of God through His Son Jesus Christ.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Reconciliation" on page 1337-1338 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What emotions bubble up when you think of what God has done in Christ on your behalf? What hinders you from being a more effective ambassador for Christ?

## READY (2 Cor. 6:1-2)

Paul concluded his discussion of reconciliation in Christ. He reminded the Corinthians that responding to the gospel sincerely was an urgent matter.

### VERSE 1

**Working together with him, we also appeal to you, "Don't receive the grace of God in vain."**

In the words **working together with him**, the pronoun *him* does not appear in the Greek text but is implied by the context. Paul stressed his dependence on God for every aspect of his ministry. God called him to salvation, commissioned him as an apostle, and empowered him for service through the Holy Spirit. The work Paul did was God's work; Paul had the privilege of working with God to accomplish it.

The same is true for us as believers. We are privileged to be coworkers together with God in His plan of redemption (1 Cor. 3:9). We not only work for God but also with Him in the most important labor on earth. Our joining with God in the work He is doing assures us of power and effectiveness in our spiritual labors. We are never alone in His work, and no effort is ever wasted.

On the other hand, some believers may be tempted to squander their opportunities to live obediently and serve faithfully. Thus, Paul warned the Corinthians not to **receive the grace of God in vain**. Interpreters are divided

on the matter of whom Paul had in mind with this command. He preceded it with the statement **we also appeal to you**. The simplest understanding would be a reference to the Corinthian believers. However, as we noted regarding Paul's previous admonition for reconciliation in 5:20, he may have intended the message for unbelievers. Let's consider each view and explore what Paul's command might mean for each group.

First, let's consider the view that Paul had in mind unbelievers. There certainly might have been unbelievers present in the Corinthian congregation when Paul's letter was read aloud. If the apostle had those people in mind, then the words *the grace of God* referred to their opportunity to be saved upon hearing the gospel. To receive God's grace *in vain* likely referred to their hearing the gospel but rejecting God's invitation to be saved.

Second, let's consider the possible interpretation that Paul had in mind believers in Corinth. The problem for some Bible students regarding this interpretation is the suggestion that it might imply that believers could lose their salvation. That conclusion, however, is not a necessary implication. If Paul used the phrase *the grace of God* in reference to God's patient admonitions of corrective action rather than to God's saving grace at conversion, then Paul wanted to make sure the believers in Corinth did not miss out on the full blessings of obedience to Christ. Many of Paul's admonitions to the Corinthians were directed at correcting their nonspiritual attitudes and actions. He wanted them to experience the full blessings of the Christian life that come with total surrender to the will of Christ.

In my estimation, both of these views express biblically true principles. The lost should realize the peril of rejecting opportunities to believe in Christ as Savior. Those who are saved need to recognize the importance of growing in the Christian life. In light of the overall context of 2 Corinthians, I believe that Paul probably had believers in mind when he warned about not receiving God's grace in vain.

## VERSE 2

**For he says: At an acceptable time I listened to you, and in the day of salvation I helped you. See, now is the acceptable time; now is the day of salvation!**

Paul supported his statement in verse 1 with an Old Testament Scripture. In particular, he drew from Isaiah 49:8. In that chapter, the prophet Isaiah foresaw the future appearance of God's messianic servant. In addition, he foresaw the Lord's deliverance of His people from their future exile in Babylon. These prophecies would be fulfilled ultimately by the appearance of the Savior who would usher in a new age of salvation. New Testament writers

clearly identify Jesus as the Servant of God who fulfills these prophecies (Matt. 12:14-21; Acts 3:13,26).

Some Bible interpreters see similarities between Isaiah's and Paul's ministries. Isaiah prophesied to a people who were stubbornly resistant to repentance and God's warning to turn from idolatry. Paul similarly confronted the Corinthians regarding their temptation to return to idolatry. The apostle would address this issue again in the latter part of chapter 6 (see 2 Cor. 6:14-18). Isaiah addressed the believing community of Israel, and Paul addressed the church in Corinth. Both the prophet and the apostle offered their respective audiences opportunity for blessings through obedience.

With the words **at an acceptable time I listened to you, and in the day of salvation I helped you**, Paul pointed to the fulfillment of God's promises in Isaiah's day in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as well as the inauguration of the new covenant. The apostle's reminder concerning the new covenant was a direct rebuke of the Judaizers who challenged his ministry and sought to undermine the Corinthian church with false teaching (2 Cor. 3:12-16). Paul emphasized that *the day of salvation* had arrived in Jesus Christ. Believers from that point on were living in the new age of God's grace for Jews and Gentiles united in His church.

The Corinthians who were genuine believers were never in danger of losing their salvation. Salvation is God's gift given by His grace apart from good works. It is offered to all who will receive it by faith. The Corinthians were in danger of refusing to submit to God's messenger (Paul) and falling back into sin and idolatry. Their decision to submit or to rebel would define whether they would grow in grace or receive God's grace in vain.

Reconciliation with God was achieved for us through the substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ. Reconciliation also implies the believer's continuing obedience to God's will. In Old Testament times, the Israelites experienced God's disciplinary judgment when they turned from God to worship idols. They experienced the discipline of God to correct their rebellious attitudes and actions. Paul called on the Corinthians (and all believers) to demonstrate their reconciliation to God through acceptance of His Word and will for their lives.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

What convinced you that responding to God's offer of salvation in Christ was an urgent matter? What excuses have you heard people give for not responding immediately in faith to God's call to salvation? How can believers avoid receiving God's grace in vain?

# GIVING FAITHFULLY

Believers show trust in God by using their resources to meet the needs of others.

A missionary couple on a stateside visit stood before a church congregation to tell about the place where they lived and served. Most of the people the missionaries sought to reach with the gospel were extremely poor, in some cases lacking the basic requirements of life. As the couple poured out their hearts concerning the need for more resources to help meet people's needs, the congregation seemed unmoved. The worshipers had their own needs and had learned to dismiss such appeals with flimsy excuses. At best they planned to contribute a small, token amount in the collection plate.

The couple's passionate report deeply moved at least one member of the congregation, however. An elderly woman decided to give a sacrificial offering. She had been crippled in one leg from childhood and worked at a minimum wage job. She had little money to give. But she had heard the missionaries speak of disabled people in their mission church. So she quietly slipped off her leg brace and gave it to the usher passing the collection plate. Her sacrificial gift motivated others to give generously to the couple's missionary work.

In a similar way, Paul used an example of sacrificial giving by impoverished Christians in Macedonia to encourage the Corinthian believers to fulfill their commitment to send financial support to famine-stricken believers in Jerusalem. This study will help us to examine our willingness to use our God-given resources to meet others' needs.

## UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

### 2 CORINTHIANS 8:1–9:15

In 1 Corinthians 16:1-4, Paul gave instructions as to how the Corinthians could participate in an offering he was collecting for the benefit of impoverished Christians in Jerusalem. He recommended that the Corinthian believers set aside something each week in proportion to how

the Lord had prospered each believer. Using this strategy meant the offering would be ready to send when Paul next visited Corinth. However, between the times of writing 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians, Paul evidently heard that the Corinthians were lagging in the collection of their offerings. Perhaps (as sometimes happens today) the believers reacted to the church's many problems by holding back their offerings in protest. In any case, Paul addressed the matter again in 2 Corinthians 8–9, urging the church to fulfill its commitment to give faithfully and generously. In the process, he revealed a number of timeless principles of Christian stewardship.

In 8:1-9, Paul used the example of Christians in Macedonia who had joyfully given to the offering despite their affliction and poverty. Paul likely was in Macedonia when he wrote 2 Corinthians (7:5-6). He commended the Macedonian churches (Philippi, Berea, and Thessalonica) for their sacrificial giving and urged the Corinthians to likewise excel in the grace of giving.

In 8:10–9:5, Paul urged the Corinthians to follow through on their commitment to give to the relief offering. He promised accountability for how the money would be taken to Jerusalem and how it would be distributed. He reminded them that giving to help others demonstrated their love for God. Moreover, he had boasted to the Macedonians of the Corinthians' great desire to help in the relief effort.

In 9:6-11, Paul spoke of the benefits of generous giving using the analogy of sowing and reaping. He urged that all giving was to be done willingly and cheerfully. The Corinthians' joyful giving would glorify God.

In 9:12-15, Paul promised that those who received help in Jerusalem would praise God for the Corinthians' gifts. Further, the Corinthians' willingness to help would be seen as a sign of God's grace in the Corinthian church. Paul ended with an exclamation of praise for God's gift of His Son Jesus Christ.

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

### **CONFIDENCE EXPRESSED** (2 Cor. 9:1-5)

In these verses, Paul focused on encouraging the believers at Corinth to match their enthusiasm and commitment to the relief effort. The apostle's emphasis in chapters 8–9 is on giving to help impoverished Christians, but the principles apply to every act of Christian stewardship.

#### **VERSE 1**

**Now concerning the ministry to the saints, it is unnecessary for me to write to you.**

The phrase **ministry to the saints** repeats the words Paul used in 2 Corinthians 8:4 in describing the Macedonian churches' desire to help fellow Christians in need. The Greek word translated *ministry* literally refers to waiting on tables. Early Christians came to use the term to describe the nature of Christian ministry as serving others in Jesus' name (Acts 6:1; 1 Tim. 1:12). The Corinthians' collection of funds to aid the impoverished Christians in Jerusalem was an act of service to God and to their brothers and sisters in Christ. A basic biblical principle is that family members have an obligation to take care of one another (1 Tim. 5:8). The care of those in our physical family is extended to those in our spiritual family because of our connection to Jesus Christ in salvation (Gal. 6:10).

Paul employed a rhetorical device when he said **it is unnecessary for me to write to you**. We talk similarly when we preface a sentence with words such as "needless to say" and then proceed to say something. Paul was gently reminding the Corinthians of something he should not have needed to remind them. They needed to fulfill their previous commitment to collect an offering for the suffering Christians in Jerusalem.

We should not overlook the significance of Paul's description of stewardship as ministry. We often think of ministry as preaching, teaching, counseling, and other actions that are hands-on types of activities. Giving money to go toward helping others often involves intermediaries. Yet, preaching, teaching, and other acts of ministry also are supported through financial contributions. All who give generously to the work of the Lord thus share in the results of all kinds of ministries that are made possible by their contributions.

## VERSE 2

**For I know your eagerness, and I boast about you to the Macedonians: "Achaia has been ready since last year," and your zeal has stirred up most of them.**

Paul commended the Corinthians for their **eagerness** in wanting to provide resources for their brothers and sisters in Christ. Paul used the Greek word rendered *eagerness* ("forwardness of ... mind," KJV; "readiness," ESV) three times in chapter 8 to describe a proper attitude in giving (2 Cor. 8:11,12,19). Paul's commendation of their desire to help contrasts with his later admonition not to give grudgingly (9:7). Spiritual Christians are generous givers. They only need to be made aware of a need to respond. Paul's principles related to Christian stewardship found in chapters 8–9 are an excellent resource for teaching believers how to please God in their giving.

The Corinthians' initial eagerness to participate in the relief offering had motivated the Christians in Macedonian churches (Philippi, Thessalonica,

Berea) to get involved. The name **Achaia** [uh KAY yuh] refers to the region where Corinth was located. Paul said that the Corinthians had been **ready since last year**, suggesting that the Corinthians already had collected some funds. His warning in the next verse, however, probably implied that their giving had lagged in recent times.

Paul acknowledged that the Corinthians had a **zeal** for giving. This term refers to a fiery passion for God that overflows in acts of love and service. Church leaders often consider how to motivate believers in their congregation to give to various causes. They sometimes resort to strategies used by secular fund-raisers to accomplish their goals. While principles of stewardship should be taught to believers, the motivation to give should never be an appeal to selfish or prideful attitudes. Jesus gave selflessly to accomplish God's will and to provide for our salvation. Believers who are transformed through faith in Christ and are filled with His Spirit give freely out of their new nature. They remain ready to give as God directs.

### VERSE 3

**But I am sending the brothers so that our boasting about you in this matter would not prove empty, and so that you would be ready just as I said.**

The **brothers** that Paul sent to Corinth included Titus and at least one unnamed individual with a stellar reputation among the churches (8:17-18). Paul's plan was for trustworthy Christian individuals to handle all the funds collected by the churches so that no question might arise about the apostle's integrity. His further hope was that the Corinthians would be spurred to gather their offerings if they knew the couriers were coming soon. Paul did not want his commendation of the Corinthians' enthusiasm for ministry to **prove empty**.

Christian maturity includes the earnest desire to carry out one's commitments. We do not want to disappoint spiritual leaders who have confidence in us. More importantly, however, we should be motivated to honor the Lord Jesus Christ with our faithful service. One day we as believers will give an account of our stewardship of time, talents, and treasure before our Savior and Master. What a joy it will be at that time to hear Him say to us, "Well done!"

### VERSE 4

**Otherwise, if any Macedonians come with me and find you unprepared, we, not to mention you, would be put to shame in that situation.**

Paul had spoken glowingly to the **Macedonians** about the Corinthians' desire to provide a generous offering for the Christians in Jerusalem. Some of those Macedonian believers perhaps would be among the couriers coming to Corinth to receive and deliver the funds. Paul did not want the couriers to arrive and find the Corinthians **unprepared** to present their offering. Such a scenario would be highly embarrassing to both Paul and the Corinthian church. The Greek word rendered **put to shame** ("humiliated," ESV) can also mean "be disappointed." The New Testament declares that those who put their faith in Jesus Christ will never be disappointed (Rom. 9:33; 10:11; 1 Pet. 2:6). Sadly, what is true of Jesus is not always true of His followers. When we make promises that we do not keep, we disappoint Christians and unbelievers alike. Christians who fail to keep their promises to financially support the work of their church disappoint church leaders and the Lord.

#### VERSE 5

**Therefore I considered it necessary to urge the brothers to go on ahead to you and arrange in advance the generous gift you promised, so that it will be ready as a gift and not as an extortion.**

The **brothers** who would **go on ahead to you** probably referred to Titus and the courier (or couriers) mentioned in 9:3. Evidently, some additional believers would come after the first group arrived.

Paul referred to the Corinthians' offering for the impoverished Christians in Jerusalem as a **generous gift**. The Greek term can also refer to flattering speech but often describes blessings from God to His people (see Eph. 1:3). Thus, the recipients of the offering would view it not just as one church helping another but also as a spiritual blessing from God.

The final phrase, **as a gift and not as an extortion** emphasizes the importance of motivation in the offering. Paul did not want the Corinthians to give out of obligation or necessity but willingly and joyfully. Intimidation exerted in fundraising is common in the secular world; it has no place in Christian stewardship and ministry. As God's people, we have every reason to give freely and willingly, since that is the way God gives blessings to us.

### EXPLORE FURTHER

What techniques did Paul use to motivate the Corinthians to give? What are some improper motivations you've seen used to pressure people to give? What best motivates you to give to God's work and to help those who are in need?

## BENEFITS FOUND (2 Cor. 9:6-11)

Paul highlighted the benefits the Corinthian believers would gain as a result of their giving. He pointed to God's provisions for them and the enrichment they would gain from knowing they had helped others in Jesus' name.

### VERSE 6

**The point is this: The person who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the person who sows generously will also reap generously.**

Paul illustrated the principle of Christian giving by describing a common principle from agriculture—sowing and reaping. The farmer who plants only a few seeds cannot expect a bountiful harvest. The same principle is at work in spiritual service: **the person who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly.** It stands to reason, then, that the opposite also is true in spiritual matters. **The person who sows generously will also reap generously.**

To the untrained eye, the farmer sowing seed appears to be throwing away his precious grain. Similarly, some unbelievers look at Christians who contribute to God's work and conclude they are throwing away their hard-earned money. Wise Christians know that they are investing in eternal treasure and that God's response will be to bless both them and the recipients of their generosity.

We must be careful, however, not to misapply this principle of giving. Sadly, some "health and wealth" TV preachers today abuse the sowing and reaping principle to their selfish advantage. They falsely teach that giving to their ministry will guarantee material wealth. God's Word does not support such a promise. God promises blessings for the faithful steward. These blessings can take many forms and are distributed both in this life and the life to come. Eternal, spiritual blessings are always to be preferred over material wealth that remains behind at our deaths.

Generous giving is often sacrificial giving. Sacrificial giving is calculated based on percentages rather than amounts. Jesus praised a poor widow who put in two small coins and rebuked those who gave larger amounts to the temple treasury purely for show (Mark 12:42-43). The widow's smaller amount represented great sacrifice on her part, while the pretentious contributors gave only a small part of their wealth. The point is this: everyone can be a generous giver no matter how much or little they possess. Churches and Christian institutions too often emphasize the giving of large amounts and honor those givers publicly. The most sacrificial givers are sometimes known only to God. The greatest recognition for faithful Christian stewards will be when we give account of our lives and service before the Lord Jesus Christ.

## VERSE 7

**Each person should do as he has decided in his heart—not reluctantly or out of compulsion, since God loves a cheerful giver.**

The statement that **each person should do as he has decided in his heart** emphasizes every believer's responsibility to give as part of their Christian service. The decision to give should be voluntary and directed by God alone. Giving should never become static and fixed. Giving is a dynamic of the Christian life that should constantly be examined. We should be open to giving as new opportunities present themselves. We should seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Giving should also consider the needs that we are made aware of. Paul made the churches he established aware of the needs of Christians in Jerusalem.

Paul warned against giving **reluctantly or out of compulsion**. These two Greek terms emphasize unacceptable attitudes in giving. The first speaks of a sorrow for having lost resources after giving. The second describes giving out of coercion, either internally or externally. Positively, Paul said that **God loves a cheerful giver**. Our goal in giving should always be to please God. God's gifts to us are always given willingly and cheerfully. Acceptable gifts from believers must also be given cheerfully and not under compulsion. Pastors and teachers are right to rebuke sinful and selfish reasons for failures in Christian stewardship. As Paul declared in 1 Corinthians 13:3, "If I give away all my possessions ... but do not have love, I gain nothing."

## VERSE 8

**And God is able to make every grace overflow to you, so that in every way, always having everything you need, you may excel in every good work.**

Here Paul addressed the fear that keeps some Christians from giving generously. It is the fear that we will not have enough for our own needs if we contribute to the needs of others. Paul reminded the Corinthians that God is the great Provider. In this verse, we see Paul's use of the phrases **every grace, in every way, always, everything you need, and in every good work** to emphasize the sufficiency of God to meet our needs. Whatever we have comes from God, and we can trust that He will sustain and provide for generous givers. The Bible warns that those who fearfully hoard their wealth will come to poverty while those who give generously will prosper (Prov. 11:24).

Sacrificial giving is an act of faith. As in the case mentioned previously of the poor widow whom Jesus commended for giving her last two coins, the woman surely gave while believing that God would provide for her.

Giving is trusting that God will provide all that we need because we tap into His unlimited supply.

#### VERSE 9

**As it is written: He distributed freely; he gave to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.**

In this verse, Paul drew from Psalm 112:9. The Old Testament verse describes generosity to the poor. The verb rendered **distributed** harks back to the agricultural metaphor from 2 Corinthians 9:6. Bible scholars have differing views on whether the pronouns **he** and **his** refer to the generous believer or to God. I prefer the view that the reference is to God as the supreme example of righteous giving. Generosity to the poor is not a natural inclination of the sinful nature. In secular Greek society, giving to the poor was considered a senseless act with no prospect of reward.

By using the Old Testament verse, Paul described sincere giving as an act of God's **righteousness**. Giving to help others should not be an exceptional act for believers but a basic responsibility. God is generous and those who share in the salvation He provides in Jesus reflect His righteousness when they care for the poor and needy.

#### VERSE 10

**Now the one who provides seed for the sower and bread for food will also provide and multiply your seed and increase the harvest of your righteousness.**

Paul reminded the Corinthians that God would make their generous gift possible by His provision. God is the One who **provides seed for the sower**. This statement reminds us as believers that we really are not owners but rather stewards of resources God gives us. We may work extremely hard to earn our living, yet God gives us the strength and capacity to work.

The imagery of money or possessions as *seed* is significant. Seed eventually decays when stored permanently in a barn. Only when we sow the seed can it produce a crop and harvest. Jesus once told a parable about a rich man who accumulated great wealth from his crops and chose to build bigger barns for storing the harvests rather than help those around him who had nothing to eat. The man died suddenly and never benefited from his harvests. Jesus concluded the parable by saying that people in God's kingdom should be rich toward God through generous giving (Luke 16:16-21).

The harvest of faithful stewardship includes the spiritual blessing of **righteousness**. This statement prepares us for the promises given to

generous contributors in 9:11. The large harvest included two elements. The harvest referred to those who would be blessed by the generosity of the Corinthian givers. The harvest also referred to the reward God would give to faithful Christian stewards.

#### VERSE 11

**You will be enriched in every way for all generosity, which produces thanksgiving to God through us.**

Paul promised that generous givers would be **enriched** as a result of their giving. Again, we must be careful not to understand this verse as a divine guarantee of greater material wealth for the giver. Take note of the attitude behind the giving: **generosity** (“bountifulness,” KJV). To be generous is to truly care about the well-being of others, wanting those who have little to share in the God-given bounty that we enjoy. Generosity does not focus selfishly on getting something in return.

Because God is the provider of wealth and enables us to give, the result will be **thanksgiving to God** because of faithful Christian stewardship. God will receive the honor and glory for the gifts He has provided. When others help us through their giving, we should give them thanks for their generosity. We should reserve our greatest thanks for God who provided the resources and motivated those who gave.

### EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Stewardship” on pages 1506–1507 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How is stewardship related to a believer’s time, talents, and material possessions? What does God expect of Christian stewards? How will He reward good stewards?

### ADORATION GAINED (2 Cor. 9:12-15)

#### VERSE 12

**For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God.**

Paul used the phrase **ministry of this service** to describe the relief offering’s nature and purpose. It was much more than charitable giving to gain a tax deduction or to bolster the giver’s reputation in the community. The Greek

word rendered *ministry* defined the offering as an act of humble Christian service by one believer (or group of believers) for another (see Acts 6:2 where the root word is rendered “to wait on tables”). In early Christian contexts, the Greek word rendered *service* included the aspect of worship (Phil. 2:17; 4:18). Thus, when Christians give generously to support God’s work, they humbly serve others and at the same time worship God.

The recipients of the relief offering would undoubtedly express **thanks to God** in many ways. They would view the offering as God’s gracious provision and protection channeled to them through His people elsewhere.

#### VERSES 13-14

**Because of the proof provided by this ministry, they will glorify God for your obedient confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone. And as they pray on your behalf, they will have deep affection for you because of the surpassing grace of God in you.**

Paul explained that the offering would demonstrate the Corinthians’ **obedient confession of the gospel of Christ**, for which the Jerusalem saints would **glorify God**. The Corinthians’ generous giving would give evidence that the gospel transforms believers’ attitudes and actions into Christlike obedience. Further, the offering’s recipients would be motivated to **pray** for the Corinthians and develop a **deep affection** for them.

#### VERSE 15

**Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!**

Paul concluded with a doxology of gratitude for God’s **indescribable gift** of grace through Jesus Christ. The gift of Jesus, our Savior and Lord, should motivate all of our giving. What a fitting conclusion this statement made to Paul’s appeal for the Corinthians to complete their commitment and follow through on their giving to help the suffering believers in Jerusalem.

### EXPLORE FURTHER

How can your group’s efforts to help meet other people’s physical needs open the door for meeting spiritual needs? To what extent would you say that God’s gift of salvation in Jesus motivates your willingness to give faithfully and generously to missions causes?

# FINDING STRENGTH

Believers can trust in God's strength when confronted with their weaknesses.

What would it be like to never feel pain? Most of us would probably count that as a miraculous medical breakthrough. However, we would soon find that pain is sometimes a benefit, not a burden. Consider, for example, the small number of people who actually live with no experience of physical pain. They are born with a rare disorder of the nervous system that blocks them from feeling the sensations of pain, heat, cold, or any other nerve-related sensations. They live at constant risk of suffering burns, cuts, and broken bones without realizing the damage that has been done. They can die from conditions such as a ruptured appendix simply because they have no pain to warn them something is wrong.

Pain can also be an advantage spiritually for those who understand how to properly respond. Illness and pain can remind us of our need to trust in God's strength rather than our own. Weakness can be a source of strength if we place our trust and confidence in God.

In this session's Bible passage, Paul wrote about a weakness he endured that kept him humble and trusting in God. He boasted of his difficulties, because they kept his faith anchored in the sufficiency of God. May we too consider how God can use the difficulties in our lives to strengthen our faith.

## UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

### 2 CORINTHIANS 10:1–13:13

In 2 Corinthians 10:1-11, Paul sought to prepare the Corinthians for his upcoming visit. He urged them to be obedient to God's commands so that he would not have to rebuke them when he arrived. Paul knew that false teachers in Corinth had attacked his character. He defended himself by reminding the Corinthians of his initial preaching of the gospel in Corinth and subsequent ministry to believers.

In 11:1-15, Paul rebuked some of the Corinthians for following deceptive teachers who proclaimed a false gospel. Paul defended his conduct among the Corinthians and warned that false teachers were apostles of Satan.

In 11:16-33, Paul indicated that the false teachers were Judaizers who taught that people earned salvation by their good works. Paul reminded the Corinthian believers of his conversion from these false doctrines to faith in Christ alone for salvation. He recalled many of his sufferings for the cause of Christ to demonstrate his willingness to die for the truth of the gospel.

In 12:1-10, Paul told of receiving special revelations from God. He revealed that God had given him a thorn in the flesh to keep him humble. Paul boasted of the weaknesses that kept him humble and dependent on God's power.

In 12:11-13:13, Paul again focused on his upcoming visit to Corinth. He hoped to find the Corinthians repentant and obedient to God. He warned that if his opponents continued in disobedience, he would confront their sinful actions and attitudes when he arrived. Paul ended the letter with a call for the Corinthians to pursue maturity, peace, and obedience to God.

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

### PAUL'S WEAKNESS (2 Cor. 12:7b-10)

In defending his credentials as an apostle, Paul revealed that God had given him “extraordinary revelations” (12:7a). At the same time, God used an ongoing painful condition in Paul's life to help the apostle avoid sinful pride. The condition helped Paul depend on God's grace and view his weakness as a benefit, not a burden.

#### VERSE 7b

**Therefore, so that I would not exalt myself, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to torment me so that I would not exalt myself.**

In 2 Corinthians 11:24-28, Paul listed the types of hardships that he endured throughout his ministry. Most of those difficulties were linked directly or indirectly to opposition to the gospel. Here in 12:7b, Paul spoke of a different kind of suffering not related to persecution—a **thorn in the flesh**. The Greek word translated *thorn* appears only here in the entire New Testament. The term can refer to anything having a sharp, pointed end, including a stake, medical instrument, or thorn. Anyone who has experienced a thorn's painful stab can well appreciate Paul's word picture. If the thorn's tip happens to

break off under the skin, then the pain gets compounded with swelling and possible infection. While Paul often used the term rendered *the flesh* as a metaphor for humanity's sinful nature, in this context it probably refers simply to his physical body. In other words, Paul had a chronic problem related to his physical well-being that was both painful and a hindrance in his ministry as a gospel evangelist.

What exactly was Paul's physical problem? Bible commentators throughout the years have offered various suggestions, including malarial fever, chronic headaches or earaches, epileptic seizures, and loss of vision. The fact is, however, that Paul didn't specify the affliction, perhaps because he knew that the Corinthians were aware of it. He chose instead to focus on how God used the physical infirmity for his good and for God's glory.

Notice first that Paul indicated the malady had been **given** to him. He had come to view the affliction with the same sense of trust in God that he viewed his calling as an apostle. God had a purpose for allowing Paul's "thorn" to remain.

Second, Paul stated that purpose twice in the span of this half-verse: **so that I would not exalt myself**. God permitted Paul's painful "thorn" to remain so that it would help the apostle avoid sinful spiritual pride. As a former Pharisee, Paul had once put great value in self-promotion and spiritual pride—attitudes Jesus strongly condemned (Matt. 23:2-7; see Phil. 3:4-6). Now he was a new creation in Christ, delivered from the realm of sin and self-righteousness to the forgiveness and freedom of the gospel. Still, Paul knew that salvation involves not only justification for the past (I have been saved) but also sanctification in the present (I am being saved as I grow in faith) and, eventually, glorification in the life to come (I shall be saved in heaven forever). Paul therefore concluded that God was using his "thorn in the flesh" to help sanctify him, to keep him growing in faith.

Third, Paul did not deny that his affliction was both severely painful and a hindrance to his gospel ministry. Like the disasters that befell Job in the Old Testament, Paul's "thorn" was a **messenger of Satan** sent to **torment** ("buffet," KJV; "harass," ESV) Paul. The Greek verb rendered *torment* literally means "to strike with the fist." It also appears in the Gospels in reference to the beatings Jesus endured from Roman soldiers before His crucifixion (Matt. 26:67; Mark 14:65). With every untimely flare-up of his affliction, Paul felt that he was being sucker-punched by the devil.

What can we learn from Paul's experience? Not all suffering comes as a consequence of sinful choices. In fact, God may allow His people to experience some suffering to help them grow in their faith. He is not cruel, however. He does not enjoy seeing His people suffer. Rather, He gives us strength to endure suffering and uses it for our greater good and His glory.

## VERSE 8

**Concerning this, I pleaded with the Lord three times that it would leave me.**

Paul's first response to his pain was to plead with the Lord to remove it. Paul testified that he **pleaded with the Lord three times**. The phrase *three times* probably refers to three separate instances when Paul made his affliction a matter of intense prayer. He had seen God deliver others from physical maladies. He believed the Lord could deliver him as well.

Further, Paul believed in the power of persistent prayer. In His parable of the persistent widow and unjust judge, Jesus taught His disciples to “pray always and not give up” (Luke 18:1) by saying, “Will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off?” (18:7). Paul took seriously Jesus' teaching, praying intensely about his situation until he was convinced that the Lord had something better in mind for him.

## VERSE 9

**But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is perfected in weakness.” Therefore, I will most gladly boast all the more about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may reside in me.**

We do not know the means by which the Lord spoke to Paul in answering his prayer. We do know, however, precisely what God said to him: **My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is perfected in weakness**. God promised Paul that His **grace** would overcome any weakness the apostle suffered.

As believers, God's grace meets us first in our salvation experience. It does not end there, however, it continues to empower us throughout our lives as Christ's followers. Whatever we are called on to endure for the cause of Christ, God will enable us to persevere and succeed. God's provisions are more than sufficient for our needs.

God's sufficient power for living is always available for believers, but we do not always seek it. Too often we trust in our own strength. We set ourselves up for failure by thinking that we can do the work of ministry in our power. Paul recognized that his “thorn” actually helped him stay dependent on God's power. He realized that God was using his infirmity to strengthen his faith. Paul's faith was being **perfected**.

The false teachers that Paul encountered in the Corinthian church boasted of their strengths and accomplishments. Paul chose to boast about his **weaknesses**. He had come to view his trials and afflictions—even his

“thorn in the flesh”—as means by which **Christ’s power** would be made evident in his life. Paul would be a walking, talking testimony of the gospel!

#### VERSE 10

**So I take pleasure in weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and in difficulties, for the sake of Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong.**

Paul concluded his discussion on suffering by combining in one list the types of suffering that arise from physical disabilities (**weaknesses**), opposition to Christian faith and ministry (**insults, persecutions**), and the general challenges of human life (**hardships, difficulties**). In other words, believers could view any and all types of suffering in relation to Christ’s lordship in their lives (**for the sake of Christ**). God does not allow His people to suffer because He hates them. On the contrary, He gives us strength to endure and uses our sufferings to develop our faith in Him.

Paul had reached an understanding of suffering and Christ’s lordship that allowed him to **take pleasure** (“[be] content with,” ESV; “delight in,” NIV) in the midst of his painful experiences. The Greek word rendered *take pleasure* does not describe a sadistic love of pain. Rather, it means “to be resolved about something.” Paul was resolved that the Lord had his circumstances under control for his ultimate good and for God’s glory. If the Lord deemed it best that Paul’s “thorn” remain and his other difficulties continue, then the apostle was pleased that the long-term result would be greater spiritual strength (**when I am weak, then I am strong**).

### EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Thorn in the Flesh” on pages 1567–1568 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What painful circumstances or difficult conditions have you prayed for the Lord to remove but continue to experience? How can Paul’s testimony of God’s sufficient grace speak to your situation?

### CHRIST’S STRENGTH (2 Cor. 13:2-4)

In chapter 13, Paul focused on his upcoming (third) visit to Corinth that he feared would have to include disciplining some of the unrepentant Corinthian believers. To prepare for this eventuality, he quoted Deuteronomy 19:15 to remind the Corinthians that he would use scriptural due process.

## VERSE 2

**I gave a warning when I was present the second time, and now I give a warning while I am absent to those who sinned before and to all the rest: If I come again, I will not be lenient,**

Many Christians today have little experience with the practice of scripturally based church discipline. Paul did not relish having to discipline believers, but he considered it to be a necessary and proper action for a church when a believer practiced an openly sinful lifestyle. The church, as Christ's body, was a spiritual family, and its members were to love and take responsibility for one another. This sometimes involved imposing redemptive discipline on a Christian who strayed into stubborn sinfulness. Allowing such sinfulness to continue unchecked would tarnish the church's gospel witness in the community and potentially lead others in the church to sin.

In 2 Corinthians 2:1, Paul referred to a previous "painful visit" that he had made to Corinth. Here in 13:2, he reminded the Corinthian believers of **a warning** he had issued while he was with them. The previous warning's content is not stated, but presumably it was similar to what Paul was about to say in this written warning. If errant believers continued in their sinful ways despite patient pleadings for them to repent, then the church would take stringent disciplinary action. The time for leniency would be over.

The discipline that could be imposed included expulsion from the fellowship and being given over "to Satan for the destruction of the flesh" (1 Cor. 5:5; see also 5:11-13). The latter of these two actions probably referred to physical judgments such as sickness or even death (see 1 Cor. 11:30). They were serious punishments for serious offenses, but they were imposed for the purpose of persuading the offending believers to repent and be restored.

## VERSE 3

**since you seek proof of Christ speaking in me. He is not weak in dealing with you, but powerful among you.**

Some of the offenders in Corinth constantly challenged Paul's authority as an apostle. They kept insisting that Paul needed to prove Christ spoke through him. Their demand for **proof** sounded similar to the Jews' demand for signs before believing in Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 1:22; see also John 4:48).

The disobedient Corinthians had opposite views from Paul regarding what constituted strength and weakness. For the erring Corinthians, strength was supernatural power, physical power, or persuasive oratory. Paul had learned that real strength came from humility and dependence on Christ. Godly living showed true spiritual strength, not displays of miraculous powers.

Paul wanted the Corinthians to tap into the real source of power in the Christian life. They focused on extraordinary powers and flashy spiritual gifts as the goal of the Christian life. Thus, they experienced the disruptions that sinful ambition and envy produce in a church. Paul pointed them instead toward humility and dependence on God. He refused to engage with the false teachers in their prideful challenges to competition. Paul had already proven his apostleship to the Corinthians many times over through his love, ministry, and faithfulness to Christ. He warned that when he came to visit, the offenders would see Christ's power in ways they didn't expect.

#### VERSE 4

**For he was crucified in weakness, but he lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in him, but in dealing with you we will live with him by God's power.**

For Paul, Jesus set the supreme example of spiritual strength in weakness. Jesus achieved our salvation when He was **crucified in weakness**. For those who witnessed His crucifixion, Jesus seemed to have no power. His accusers, the Roman governor, and the Roman soldiers held the power. In reality, however, an infinitely greater power was at work in that event. Jesus exercised a more potent spiritual power in willingly laying down His life for sinners. God the Father demonstrated that superior power in raising Jesus from the dead, completely overcoming that power of sin and death. The risen Lord **lives by the power of God**.

Paul went on to warn the disobedient Corinthians that he (and every faithful believer) is a recipient of the same resurrection power. No one should look on Paul's physical weaknesses, troubles, and difficulties as proof that he lacked spiritual authority. He would not be **dealing with** the offenders in his own strength. He would act in Christ's authority **by God's power**. If the disobedient Corinthians did not repent of their sins, God would discipline them and, through Paul, show them His power and their weakness.

#### EXPLORE FURTHER

Read Matthew 18:15-20. How do Jesus' words of instruction for Christians dealing with conflict give further insight into Paul's approach toward his opponents in Corinth? When have you seen church leaders resolve conflict among believers both effectively and redemptively?

## OUR CHOICE (2 Cor. 13:5-8)

### VERSES 5-6

**Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith. Examine yourselves. Or do you yourselves not recognize that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless you fail the test. And I hope you will recognize that we ourselves do not fail the test.**

Paul turned the tables on those who wanted him to provide proof of his apostleship. He challenged them to **test** (“examine,” KJV, ESV, NIV) themselves as to whether they were genuinely saved (**in the faith**). Using a different but synonymous Greek term, he repeated the challenge for his accusers to **examine** themselves. Paul’s point was that the Corinthians had no basis for calling into question his spiritual authority. If they could recognize the presence of Christ in themselves—a fact they surely claimed—then their salvation was proof enough of Paul’s apostleship (see 2 Cor. 3:1-3). He was, after all, their spiritual father in the gospel (1 Cor. 4:15)!

The phrase *in the faith* could refer either to initial conversion or ongoing obedience to Christ. Either way, some of the Corinthians were failing the basic test of discipleship. Paul wanted them to examine their lives and repent of behavior that was inconsistent with Christ’s indwelling presence. Further, he assured his detractors that he had made a similar self-examination and did **not fail the test** of discipleship.

### VERSE 7

**But we pray to God that you do nothing wrong—not that we may appear to pass the test, but that you may do what is right, even though we may appear to fail.**

In this verse, Paul emphasized that his main concern was not for his reputation but for the Corinthians’ spiritual growth. If he returned and powerfully demonstrated his authority as an apostle, yet the Corinthians failed to grow spiritually from the encounter, it would be a hollow victory. Paul stated the purpose of his ministry to the Corinthian believers when he said he desired that they **do nothing wrong**. He then stated positively that he desired for the believers to **do what is right**.

Righteousness includes obedience to the commands of God. The goal of the Christian life is to worship, serve, and obey God. God gave the church spiritual leaders to instruct, encourage, and set the example of sanctification for believers. The phrases **that we may appear to pass the test** and **though we may appear to fail** were Paul’s way of saying that gospel ministry was

not about proving his reputation but leading spiritual growth in believers. The false teachers in Corinth boasted and built their reputations for personal gain. Paul defended his reputation for the benefit of the Corinthians.

## VERSE 8

### **For we can't do anything against the truth, but only for the truth.**

This verse is key for defining Paul's ministry as an apostle of Jesus Christ. Following his encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, Paul built his life and ministry on proclaiming the gospel truth. In that transforming encounter, the former self-righteous Pharisee believed in Jesus alone as "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). From that moment on, he was not able to do **anything against the truth, but only for the truth.**

What Paul meant by being unable to oppose the truth was that he would not compromise the gospel message no matter what the cost to his comfort, safety, or health. In its broadest meaning, truth includes all the revelation of God's Word to us in the Scriptures. In the context of 2 Corinthians, Paul probably intended a particular focus on the gospel and its implications for holy living. Even though threatened and persecuted for declaring salvation through faith in Christ alone, Paul was willing to die rather than compromise the truth about salvation. He was also unwilling to compromise the moral standards of the Christian life to avoid criticism or conflict.

We began this study with Paul's seemingly contradictory teaching that when we as believers are weak, then we are strong. Paul testified about the difficulties of his life and how those experiences became classrooms where God taught him and strengthened his faith. In our world today, a culture in which boasting of personal power can be heard even in Christian circles, we as followers of Christ are called to embrace weakness so that we might experience His power. The powerful Christian life is the one lived in obedience to the will of God. We can only live that life of power by humbling ourselves before Him and trusting His purposes for our lives.

## EXPLORE FURTHER

What are some questions we might ask that would help certify the genuineness of our faith in Christ? As a believer, when have you stood for the truth of God's Word in a difficult situation? What helped you stand boldly for that truth?

# Paul's Second Missionary Journey



Paul imprisoned

Lake joins Paul

Paul receives vision that encourages him to travel to Macedonia

Paul speaks to the Achaean Islands

Paul asks Timothy to join him in his work

Paul returned from Jerusalem to plan his next venture

Jerusalem Conference, A.D. 49 (Acts 15:1-39; Gal 2:1-21)

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# 1,2 Corinthians

Disunity threatened to tear the church apart. That was just the tip of the iceberg. A church member was engaging in immoral practices—the kind of immorality that was not even tolerated among the unbelievers—yet the church in Corinth tolerated it. Things were taking place during worship that were destructive and harmful. There was confusion about spiritual gifts, with members claiming their gifts were proof of spiritual superiority. Welcome to the first-century church in Corinth. If you are the apostle Paul, what do you say to such a church? Like a father, you sternly correct them. But first you remind them of who they are in Christ, and who Christ is. You call them back to the gospel. Therein lies the answer to the moral, relational, and theological problems that plagued the Corinthian church—or any church.

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