



# Explore the Bible®

LEADER GUIDE



# 1,2 Corinthians

Spring 2018 > CSB

Clint Pressley, General Editor

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

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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 and 2 Corinthians. Here we find the gospel in all its glory and life with all its complexities. The Book of Ecclesiastes says, “there is nothing new under the sun,” and Paul’s letters to the church at Corinth prove the truism. 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 still, 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 does not disappoint. This hope gives us strength for endurance so that in our struggle, we do not lose heart.

These two books serve as a banquet table of gospel truth, served up for the strength and health of God’s people. 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 and 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***

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# WORD WISE

Terms listed here are identified in the Bible commentary with a dot (•).

**Achaia** [uh KAY yuh]—Roman province in the southern half of ancient Greece; major cities included Athens and Corinth, the administrative center

**Apollos** [uh PAHL uhs]—Alexandrian Jew, characterized in Acts 18:24 as eloquent and mighty in the Scriptures; instructed by Priscilla and Aquila (18:26); ministered in Corinth after Paul left there, building on what Paul started (18:27-28; 1 Cor. 3:6)

**Asia**—Roman province in western Asia Minor; the capital of Asia was Ephesus, where Paul stayed and taught for two years, making an impact throughout the province of Asia (Acts 19:10)

**Cephas** [SEE fuhs]—Aramaic name for the apostle Peter, given to him by Jesus (John 1:42); means “rock”

**Crispus** [KRIS puhs]—leader of the synagogue in Corinth (Acts 18:8); one of the few individuals Paul baptized there (1 Cor. 1:14); personal name meaning “curly”

**Firstfruits**—the first part of a harvest, offered as a sacrifice to God; in the New Testament, Christ’s resurrection is the firstfruits of those to follow in the end time (1 Cor. 15:20,23)

**Gaius** [GAY yuhs]—Paul’s host in Corinth (Rom. 16:23), one of the individuals Paul baptized there (1 Cor. 1:14); personal name meaning “I am glad, rejoice”

**Glory**—the weighty importance and majesty accompanying God’s presence; the verb means “to give weight to, to honor,” such honor is the recognition of the nature of the honored person and not something someone bestows on another

**Gospel**—the message of God’s saving activity through the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ

**Grace**—the undeserved acceptance and love of God; the Greek word *charis* can also carry the meaning of “benefit” (2 Cor. 1:15)

**Macedonians** [mass uh DOH nih uhns]—the people of Macedonia, a province located north of Achaia, where Corinth was located; key Macedonian cities included Philippi and Thessalonica; the gospel came to Macedonia through the preaching of Paul (Acts 16:9-10)

**Stephanas** [STEF uh nuhs]—one of Paul’s first converts in Achaia; one of the few individuals Paul baptized in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:16); leader in the Corinthian church (1 Cor. 16:15-16); personal name meaning “crown”

# BIBLE READING PLAN

## MONTH 1

- 1. 1 Corinthians 1:1-9
- 2. 1 Corinthians 1:10-17
- 3. 1 Corinthians 1:18-25
- 4. 1 Corinthians 1:26-31
- 5. 1 Corinthians 2:1-8
- 6. 1 Corinthians 2:9-16
- 7. 1 Corinthians 3:1-9
- 8. 1 Corinthians 3:10-17
- 9. 1 Corinthians 3:18-23
- 10. 1 Corinthians 4:1-5
- 11. 1 Corinthians 4:6-13
- 12. 1 Corinthians 4:14-21
- 13. 1 Corinthians 5:1-8
- 14. 1 Corinthians 5:9-13
- 15. 1 Corinthians 6:1-11
- 16. 1 Corinthians 6:12-20
- 17. 1 Corinthians 7:1-7
- 18. 1 Corinthians 7:8-16
- 19. 1 Corinthians 7:17-24
- 20. 1 Corinthians 7:25-31
- 21. 1 Corinthians 7:32-40
- 22. 1 Corinthians 8:1-6
- 23. 1 Corinthians 8:7-13
- 24. 1 Corinthians 9:1-7
- 25. 1 Corinthians 9:8-18
- 26. 1 Corinthians 9:19-27
- 27. 1 Corinthians 10:1-13
- 28. 1 Corinthians 10:14-22
- 29. 1 Corinthians 10:23-33
- 30. 1 Corinthians 11:1-6
- 31. 1 Corinthians 11:7-16

## MONTH 2

- 1. 1 Corinthians 12:1-11
- 2. 1 Corinthians 12:12-17
- 3. 1 Corinthians 12:18-26
- 4. 1 Corinthians 12:27-31
- 5. 1 Corinthians 13:1-13
- 6. 1 Corinthians 14:1-5
- 7. 1 Corinthians 14:6-12
- 8. 1 Corinthians 14:13-19
- 9. 1 Corinthians 14:20-25
- 10. 1 Corinthians 14:26-32
- 11. 1 Corinthians 14:33-40
- 12. 1 Corinthians 15:1-11
- 13. 1 Corinthians 15:12-19
- 14. 1 Corinthians 15:20-28
- 15. 1 Corinthians 15:29-34
- 16. 1 Corinthians 15:35-49
- 17. 1 Corinthians 15:50-58
- 18. 1 Corinthians 16:1-4
- 19. 1 Corinthians 16:5-12
- 20. 1 Corinthians 16:13-24
- 21. 2 Corinthians 1:1-7
- 22. 2 Corinthians 1:8-11
- 23. 2 Corinthians 1:12-22
- 24. 2 Corinthians 1:23–2:4
- 25. 2 Corinthians 2:5-11
- 26. 2 Corinthians 2:12-17
- 27. 2 Corinthians 3:1-6
- 28. 2 Corinthians 3:7-11
- 29. 2 Corinthians 3:12-18
- 30. 2 Corinthians 4:1-6

## MONTH 3

- 1. 2 Corinthians 4:7-18
- 2. 2 Corinthians 5:1-5
- 3. 2 Corinthians 5:6-10
- 4. 2 Corinthians 5:11-15
- 5. 2 Corinthians 5:16-19
- 6. 2 Corinthians 5:20–6:2
- 7. 2 Corinthians 6:3-13
- 8. 2 Corinthians 6:14-18
- 9. 2 Corinthians 7:1-4
- 10. 2 Corinthians 7:5-9
- 11. 2 Corinthians 7:10-16
- 12. 2 Corinthians 8:1-6
- 13. 2 Corinthians 8:7-15
- 14. 2 Corinthians 8:16-24
- 15. 2 Corinthians 9:1-9
- 16. 2 Corinthians 9:10-15
- 17. 2 Corinthians 10:1-6
- 18. 2 Corinthians 10:7-11
- 19. 2 Corinthians 10:12-18
- 20. 2 Corinthians 11:1-4
- 21. 2 Corinthians 11:5-11
- 22. 2 Corinthians 11:12-15
- 23. 2 Corinthians 11:16-23
- 24. 2 Corinthians 11:24-33
- 25. 2 Corinthians 12:1-5
- 26. 2 Corinthians 12:6-10
- 27. 2 Corinthians 12:11-13
- 28. 2 Corinthians 12:14-18
- 29. 2 Corinthians 12:19-21
- 30. 2 Corinthians 13:1-4
- 31. 2 Corinthians 13:5-13



# USING THIS GUIDE TO LEAD

## » PRIOR TO THE GROUP TIME

### 1. Study the core passage.

Read Understand the Context to get a clear picture of how the core passage connects to the whole. Use Explore the Text to gain an understanding of the passage. Consult a study Bible like the *CSB Study Bible* (also available online at [MyWSB.com](http://MyWSB.com)) and a Bible commentary like *Explore the Bible Adult Commentary* (available at [LifeWay.com/ExploreTheBible](http://LifeWay.com/ExploreTheBible) in both print and digital formats) to gain additional insight into the passage. Seek to define key words, phrases, places, and actions taken. Record ideas and insights gleaned from your personal study. Write a summary of the truths you discovered using the statement printed under the session title as a starting place.

**TIP:** Start preparing early. Life happens, and it tends to happen closer to times we are scheduled to lead a Bible study group.

### 2. Create a group time plan.

- a. Review First Thoughts for the session to identify a direction for the session and why that session is important to today's adults.
- b. Review the suggestions included in Lead Group Bible Study, identifying the suggestions you believe will work best with your group.
- c. Consider ways of incorporating a Bible Skill into the study, either following the suggestion given (see shaded box in each session) or by developing your own idea.
- d. Consult *QuickSource* (available from [LifeWay.com/ExploreTheBible](http://LifeWay.com/ExploreTheBible)) and the Explore the Bible blog ([Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploreTheBible/adults/LeaderExtras](http://Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploreTheBible/adults/LeaderExtras)) for additional questions and group time activities.
- e. Visit the Explore the Bible Ministry Grid page ([MinistryGrid.com/web/ExploreTheBible](http://MinistryGrid.com/web/ExploreTheBible)) for additional ideas and insights.
- f. Review the *Explore the Bible Leader Pack* items suggested. Determine how to best use the items in your group's setting.

### 3. Gather your resources.

Use the list in Gather the Following Items on the first page of each session as a starting place. Make sure you have everything you need to lead the group time using the plan you created. Make sure you have additional copies of *Explore the Bible Personal Study Guide* for anticipated guests.

**TIP:** If you plan to use the Suggested Music Idea and your small group meets with other groups prior to the study time, consider incorporating the music activity into the large group time.

#### 4. Review and refine.

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### » DURING THE GROUP TIME

#### 5. Arrive early.

The group time starts when the first person arrives. Make sure you are that person, so that you can set the tone and direction for the group Bible study time. Greet everyone as participants arrive and focus their attention on the Bible study.

#### 6. Lead the group in a time of Bible study.

Use the plan you created to lead the group time. Record notes along the way to help you remember how the group responded. Remember, every group experience takes a few unexpected twists and turns; be flexible.

**TIP:** You can record your plan on a piece of paper and carry that into the group gathering, open the Leader Guide to the Lead Group Bible Study page and guide with those pages open, or use the DOC file provided on the CD-ROM included in the *Explore the Bible Adult Leader Pack* to create your own custom notes. (The DOC file is also included in the digital bundles and digital Adult Leader Pack. See [LifeWay.com/ExploreTheBible](http://LifeWay.com/ExploreTheBible) for more information.)

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### » AFTER THE GROUP TIME

#### 7. Evaluate and Record.

Review Practice for ideas to encourage the group to put into practice the truths discovered. Record prayer requests and other insights you gained about the group and specific participants. Use these notes to help you be a better guide in the future.

#### 8. Start preparing to lead the next group time.



# INTRODUCTION TO 1,2 CORINTHIANS

In my city, Memphis, Tennessee, you will find lots of churches. We have mega-churches and storefront churches, traditional churches and contemporary churches, declining churches and growing churches. Having lived in Memphis for some thirty years, I've had the opportunity to get to know several church planters. A few of them target ethnic groups. A few have focused on parts of our city now in decay, where there used to be vibrant churches, but their facilities have been abandoned and boarded up. As I've talked with these men, they've shared their successes and their failures. One new congregation failed because the two ethnic groups participating didn't understand each other and couldn't learn to get along. One of my young pastor friends was fired after four years by the very congregation he had planted. In contrast, others have reported many baptisms and watched as persons have experienced life transformation because of Christ.

My friends' experiences are similar to what happened to the apostle Paul. One major difference: when he planted churches, they were the first congregation ever to exist in that city. He targeted Corinth for a year and a half, and a vibrant congregation sprang up (Acts 18:1-21). A few years later, however, Paul learned that not all was well among the new believers. There were divisions. Immoral practices had crept in. Christians were confused about issues such as spiritual gifts and the role of women in worship. Paul wrote both letters we are studying for the next three months to urge these believers to take the steps necessary so that they could become spiritually healthy, both individually and in their church life.

Both the Book of Acts and the letters to the Corinthians help us to understand the context and origin of these epistles. They are, of course, not just ancient correspondence. They are God's inspired word to us, and both letters have always been included in the list of books Christians consider to be the authoritative letters of the apostle Paul. They are the inspired Word of God to followers of Jesus. They are relevant to all believers, whatever kind of congregation we are connected with, not merely to those in new church plants.

## » 1 CORINTHIANS

**Writer**—The author of both 1 and 2 Corinthians named himself as “Paul” and “apostle of Jesus Christ.” That is all we need to know to identify him as the one introduced in the Book of Acts as an early tormenter of Jesus' followers who was profoundly transformed after encountering Christ on the way to Damascus (Acts 9). After several years in which he matured in his faith, Paul (also known as Saul of Tarsus) was sent out to plant churches in several Roman provinces. He also composed important letters both to congregations and to individuals. Thirteen New Testament letters bear Paul's name in the greeting. In 2 Timothy, Paul indicated he expected to die soon. According to tradition, he was martyred during Nero's rule in the AD 60s.

**Destination and First Audience**—Corinth was a large commercial city in a prime location on the narrow Isthmus of Corinth that connected the mainland of Greece to the Peloponnesian Peninsula to the south. The city, therefore, profited considerably by controlling both land and sea routes. In the first century, it was the capital of the Roman province of Achaia. As in other cities of the Empire, the citizens were both sexually permissive and quite religious, building and supporting many temples to various deities. The gospel arrived in Corinth around AD 50 as part of Paul's second missionary journey. He arrived there after establishing churches in the Macedonian cities of Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea

(Acts 16–17) and after proclaiming the gospel in Athens (Acts 17). The church planting team included Paul, Silas, and Timothy, as well as a Jewish-Christian couple, Aquila and Priscilla (Acts 18:1-5).

**Date**—When we compare Acts 19 (about Paul’s church-planting ministry in Ephesus) and 1 Corinthians 16 (about Paul’s circumstances as he wrote the letter), we can work out that the apostle composed this letter near the end of his two years in Ephesus as part of his third missionary journey (Acts 19:10; 1 Cor. 16:5). Though we cannot know with certainty, we can estimate that Paul likely wrote 1 Corinthians around AD 55.

**Occasion**—From the letter itself, we are told of several factors that prompted Paul to write: he had received a report from Chloe’s household that the church had divided into competing factions (1:11-12); it had been reported to him that the believers were tolerating sexual immorality (5:1); and he had received a written list of questions, possibly sent by three Corinthian men who visited Paul in Ephesus (7:1; 16:17). Paul wrote to address these issues, apparently with the secretarial assistance of Sosthenes and with Timothy serving as the letter carrier (1:1; 4:17).

**Important Themes**—Christian unity, sexual morality, women’s roles, spiritual gifts, and the resurrection. Uniquely for this letter, Paul used the term translated “about” to introduce a change in subjects: male and female in marriage (7:1); virgins (7:25); food offered to idols (8:1); spiritual gifts (12:1); the financial collection (16:1); and Apollos (16:12).

## » 2 CORINTHIANS

**Writer, Destination, and First Audience**—These matters are the same as for 1 Corinthians.

**Date**—Acts 20:1-2 indicates that when Paul completed his church-planting ministry in Ephesus, he went next to Macedonia and then on to Greece. In 2 Corinthians 7:5-7, Paul described that when he arrived in Macedonia, he received news about the Corinthian Christians because Titus met him there. Apparently Paul wrote from Macedonia sometime around AD 56, perhaps a year after he wrote the first letter.

**Occasion**—From the letter, we learn that Paul heard about false apostles who were causing trouble in Corinth and leading the believers astray (11:13-15). He wrote a stinging letter of rebuke (2:3-4), an epistle now lost to us. Afterward, he was anxious to discover whether his letter was effective and the Corinthians had turned from their foolishness. Finally he received good news from Titus (7:5-7). Most of the believers had repented. Paul thus wrote 2 Corinthians expressing his relief, but also addressing other important issues such as the financial collection. He evidently used the secretarial assistance of Timothy and sent the letter by Titus (1:1; 8:17).

**Important Themes**—Paul’s apostolic authority, the new covenant, the intermediate state (believers between the death of the body and the resurrection), sacrificial giving, and condemnation of false teachers.



# OUTLINE 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.

## 1 CORINTHIANS 1:10-25

**MEMORY VERSE: 1 CORINTHIANS 1:23**

- **READ** 1 Corinthians 1:1–4:21, First Thoughts (p. 14), and Understand the Context (pp. 14–15). View the video introduction by Clint Pressley at [Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible](http://Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible) or on the Leader Pack CD-ROM.
- **STUDY** 1 Corinthians 1:10-25, using Explore the Text on pages 15–19. As you study, pay close attention to the various ways Paul wrote about unity and divisions. For further insight, consult the *Explore the Bible Adult Commentary* (available in print and digital format from LifeWay.com).
- **PLAN** the group time using ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 20–21). Tailor the plans for your group using More Ideas (p. 22) and ideas included online at [Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible/Adults/LeaderExtras](http://Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible/Adults/LeaderExtras).
- **GROW** from expert insights on weekly studies through the Ministry Grid ([MinistryGrid.com/Web/ExploretheBible](http://MinistryGrid.com/Web/ExploretheBible)).
- **GATHER** the following items:  Personal Study Guides; and  Three volunteers to present a brief character sketch of Paul, Apollos, and Cephas. Make copies of:  **PACK ITEM 12** (*Handout: Problems in Corinth*); and  **PACK ITEM 13** (*Handout: Memory Verses Bookmark*; also available on the Leader Pack CD-ROM). Prepare to display the following Pack Items:  **PACK ITEM 1** (*Map: Paul's Second Missionary Journey*);  **PACK ITEM 2** (*Outline: 1,2 Corinthians*); and  **PACK ITEM 4** (*Poster: Problems in Corinth*). For More Ideas (p. 22):  Assorted pastries or snacks and napkins; and  A block of wood.



## KEY DOCTRINE

### *The Church*

A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel.

## BIBLE SKILL

*Memorize a verse and apply it to a real life situation.*

Memorize 1 Corinthians 1:23 in your preferred Bible translation. Then write the verse in your own words. Finally, write a couple of sentences stating how the verse can help you to remember that every person you meet in the coming days needs the gospel.

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# FIRST THOUGHTS

A clear purpose keeps some organizations and clubs viable. The organization's purpose unifies people with different backgrounds and opinions. But purpose alone will not keep an organization together; the purpose must be worthy and compelling. A purpose that is bigger than the individual or the needs of the group will more likely unify and sustain a group than a purpose that is reactionary or self-focused.

(In PSG, p. 10) **Have you been part of a club or organization that was driven by its purpose? How did that purpose help them deal with differences within the group?**

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The church is a group of people from different walks of life, backgrounds, and interests that finds its unity in the gospel. But at times, divisions occur in the church over many different things—some significant and some trite. Sometimes we let our preferences get in the way of our love and mission. In this week's lesson, Paul addressed divisions in the Corinthian church and called the congregation to be united.

# UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

## 1 CORINTHIANS 1:1–4:21

When Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, he was already a veteran missionary, establishing churches in Roman provinces such as Galatia, Macedonia, and Achaia (of which Corinth was the capital). He had also become adept at writing letters to these churches, addressing issues they were facing. Bible students believe that Paul had already written Galatians and the two letters to the Thessalonians before he wrote to the Corinthians.

The introduction on pages 10-11 provides details about Paul's ministry in Corinth and notes the circumstances that led him to write. His first order of business was to address the problem of church division. He devoted the bulk of chapters 1–4 to this matter. In order to get a sense of the context, consider the following overview of the first four chapters.

- *Greeting (1:1-3)*. Paul followed the accepted first-century letter layout, his standard format.
- *Thanksgiving (1:4-9)*. The apostle thanked God for his first readers immediately after the greeting, his pattern for most of his letters.
- *Divisions at Corinth (1:10-17)*. The quarreling factions at Corinth are identified and condemned.
- *Christ the power and wisdom of God (1:18-25)*. Christ alone meets the Jews' yearning for spiritual power and the Greeks' longing for true wisdom.

- *Boasting only in the Lord (1:26-31)*. Only because of Christ does anyone have a ground for true boasting.
- *Paul's proclamation (2:1-5)*. The apostle's preaching in Corinth had always focused on Jesus and His crucifixion.
- *Spiritual wisdom (2:6-16)*. The indwelling Spirit provides believers spiritual wisdom far beyond merely human wisdom.
- *The problem of immaturity (3:1-4)*. Divisions in the congregation demonstrated that the Corinthian believers were immature or fleshly.
- *The role of God's servants (3:5-17)*. Paul compared his ministry with that of Apollos, noting that they were both serving the same Lord.
- *The folly of human wisdom (3:18-23)*. In contrast to Spirit-inspired wisdom, human wisdom is foolishness in the eyes of God.
- *The faithful manager (4:1-5)*. Paul affirmed that he had faithfully fulfilled the ministry the Lord assigned him.
- *The apostles' example of humility (4:6-13)*. Paul and Apollos had been slandered and persecuted, but the Corinthian believers were full of unwarranted superiority.
- *Paul's fatherly care (4:14-21)*. Paul appealed to the believers to remember that he was their spiritual father and still cared for them as his children.

## BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read "Paul and the Corinthian Church" and "InSites: Corinth: Its History and Contribution" in the Spring 2018 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Available at [LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator](http://LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator).

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

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

Paul challenged the Corinthian Christians to be united, based on their central conviction of Christ crucified. His appeal was based on unity in central doctrinal convictions. He was not arguing for uniformity of opinion about everything.

#### VERSE 10

The verb translated **urge** indicates Paul's intense concern for the issue of unity. The use of **brothers and sisters** was the apostle's reminder that believers belong to the same spiritual family. Paul's use of Jesus' full name—**our Lord Jesus Christ**—reminds us of the seriousness of his appeal. The names of Paul, Apollos, and Cephas pale into insignificance when compared with the name and authority of Christ.

Paul organized his appeal into three parts. First, he asked that the Christians **agree** in what they say. Their speech was to reflect not a party spirit. Second, he wanted them to behave in a way that moved beyond the **divisions** threatening their fellowship. Third, moving beyond words and deeds, was the matter of their hearts: **united with the same understanding and the same conviction**. The term *understanding* relates to the mind or thought processes, while *conviction* has to do with settled opinion or intention. Paul noted elsewhere that there is room in a congregation for diverse opinions on secondary issues (Rom. 14:1-14).

### 1 CORINTHIANS 1:10

<sup>10</sup> 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.

What is the link between words, deeds, and conviction as you share life in your church? How can you live so that your words and deeds proceed from your convictions? Is there an issue that you and another Christian need to talk and pray through so that you come to a common conviction?

## Areas of Potential Division in 1 Corinthians

- *Leaders (1:12–4:21)*
- *Tolerating immorality in the church (5:1-13)*
- *Going to secular court against fellow believers (6:1-11)*
- *Marriage (7:1-40)*
- *Meat offered to idols (chaps. 8–10)*
- *Conduct of women in the church (11:1-16)*
- *The Lord's Supper (11:17-34)*
- *Spiritual gifts (chaps. 12–14)*
- *Jesus' resurrection (chap. 15)*

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

#### VERSE 11

Paul had received an oral report about the **rivalry** going on among God's people in Corinth. The apostle appealed to them as **my brothers and sisters**. He considered himself part of their spiritual family; after all, he had established the church there.

We are at a loss to understand the identity of either **Chloe** or the members of her household. Was she a wealthy Corinthian Christian woman who had sent some of her employees to Ephesus on business? If so, had they sought out Paul at her request to give him an update on the church? Could these perhaps have been her children? The original language is vague, literally "the ones of Chloe." In any case, the Corinthians knew the context and it is not necessary that we know more details about Chloe.

#### VERSE 12

The apostle named the personalities who had become figureheads for four rival segments in the church. This had happened without the authorization of any of these leaders.

- **Paul** was the preacher who had first preached the gospel to Corinth. Naturally, some of the Christians in Corinth, especially those who had become believers during Paul's long ministry there, were loyal to him.
- **Apollos** had succeeded Paul as the spiritual leader of the Corinthian congregation (Acts 18:24–19:1). Some of the Corinthians thought Apollos was a better teacher or preacher than Paul, so they had become enthusiastic followers of "the new guy."

#### 1 CORINTHIANS 1:11

<sup>11</sup>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.

#### 1 CORINTHIANS 1:12

<sup>12</sup>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."

- **Cephas** was Simon Peter. There is no record Peter ever visited Corinth, but some Corinthians became fans of his perhaps because he had followed Jesus from the beginning and Jesus had given him a special blessing (Matt. 16:19).
- Those who claimed to **belong to Christ** may have felt superior to the other three parties and had become their own high-and-mighty group. Boasting in Christ is a good thing; boasting about oneself for following Christ is sinful.

#### VERSE 13

Paul asked three rhetorical, sarcastic questions. A “no” answer is required to each question. These negative answers reveal the Corinthians’ plight and begin pointing toward the solution.

- **Is Christ divided?** Of course not! The one Lord Jesus Christ is sovereign over His entire church. He had not been dismembered.
- **Was Paul crucified for you?** Of course not! The one Lord Jesus Christ is the Savior of His church through His sacrificial death.
- **Were you baptized in Paul’s name?** Of course not! They were baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit (Matt. 28:19). Never in the New Testament was anyone baptized in the name of (or “identified with”) an apostle or other spiritual leader.

#### VERSES 14-16

At the beginning of the congregation’s life, Paul had by necessity been the baptizer. He noted two Corinthian men, •**Crispus** and •**Gaius**, whom he had baptized. (See Acts 18:8 for a reference to the conversion of Crispus and his household; see Rom. 16:23 for a reference to Gaius as Paul’s host at a later time.) Paul also had baptized **the household of •Stephanus**. (See Paul’s praise of this family for their faithful service in 1 Cor. 16:15.) Stephanus and two others visited Paul in Ephesus (1 Cor. 16:17).

Who took over the baptizing responsibilities after Paul had baptized the first converts? He did not say. The Corinthians would have remembered. In any case, Paul was pleased that his decision demonstrated he had no intention for anybody to claim that they had been baptized in his name. It’s not the baptizer who really matters, Paul was saying. He obviously hadn’t kept any personal baptismal records, and his memory for these details was foggy. From the very beginning, Paul had done everything possible to prevent a “Paul party” from developing, to no avail.

**When does appreciation of a spiritual leader cross the line into allegiance that may prove to be divisive? What are some signs that a division may be occurring in a church?**

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#### 1 CORINTHIANS 1:13

<sup>13</sup> Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in Paul’s name?

#### 1 CORINTHIANS 1:14-16

<sup>14</sup> I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, <sup>15</sup> so that no one can say you were baptized in my name. <sup>16</sup> I did, in fact, baptize the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don’t recall if I baptized anyone else.

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

### 1 CORINTHIANS 1:17-19

<sup>17</sup> 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.

<sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and I will set aside the intelligence of the intelligent.

### 1 CORINTHIANS 1:20-21

<sup>20</sup> 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? <sup>21</sup> 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 17

Paul's commission, which he had received from Christ at the time of his conversion (Acts 26:16-18), was **to preach the gospel**. He was persuaded that eloquence or elaborate rhetoric or anything that smacked of manipulation was to be avoided. It is the cross of Christ, simply presented, that must be central. (See also 1 Cor. 2:1-5.) Clever words (style) detract from the substance of the message preached.

#### VERSES 18-19

Corinth was capital of the Roman province of Achaia, but the best-known city in Achaia was Athens, long famous for its philosophers. The term "philosophy" means "love of wisdom," and learned men and women typically take pride in their intellectual achievements. Paul had made his case for Christ to some philosophers in Athens (Acts 17:16-34). He knew that the simple message of the cross is often rejected as **foolishness** by those who depend on human cleverness to discern truth. Those who reject the cross are already **perishing**, on their way to eternal separation from God. Yet those who receive the good news—convicted of its truth by the Spirit of God—**are being saved**. They have begun the spiritual transformation that happens by God's power rather than by human wisdom.

The apostle appealed to Scripture to make his case, as he often did. This time he quoted Isaiah 29:14. Depending on human wisdom had not originated with the Greeks. As God's spokesman, the prophet Isaiah had rebuked the people of Israel for depending on the wisdom of the wise and the understanding of the experts in his day. God promised to destroy and set aside such things. Instead of working through mere words, God would do "wonder after wonder."

#### VERSE 20

Paul asked three rhetorical questions to show how insubstantial the supposedly great thinkers are. **The wise** and **the teacher** and **the debater** are near synonyms for those who have been deemed important. Yet one philosophy supplants another. They all are destined to fade away. The answer to Paul's first three questions is, *They are gone!* The fourth question expects a *yes* for an answer. Those whose eyes have been opened to the truth and power of the gospel realize how feeble and foolish the world's wisdom really is. The way that seems so wise to most people is a dead-end. It is the way of the fool.

#### VERSE 21

The apostle contrasted two kinds of **wisdom**. On one hand is the wisdom that originates with God. On the other hand is the wisdom that finds its source in the world:

- God in His wisdom has determined that persons cannot know Him through wisdom, that is, through the wisdom of the world.
- God in His wisdom has determined that through something seemingly foolish—the message preached—those who believe will be saved.

### VERSES 22-23

Some of the Corinthian Christians were Jewish rather than Gentile. Paul surmised that they might be thinking, “Well, we Jews never did depend on human wisdom or the philosophies of the Greeks.” Paul reminded them that Jewish people often sought miraculous **signs** to demonstrate the truth of a teacher or prophet. (See, for example, the demand of the Pharisees and Sadducees in the time of Jesus; Matt. 16:1. Jesus refused to comply.)

The search for God via signs is as unfruitful as the search for God via worldly wisdom. The way to God and ultimate truth is only in the gospel, proclaiming **Christ crucified**. The difficulty of preaching a crucified messiah to Jews is that it appears as **a stumbling block**. They could not come to terms with the notion of their messiah dying under God’s curse (Gal. 3:13). As Paul had already written, the problem of gospel proclamation to Greeks is that it appears to be **foolishness**.

### VERSES 24-25

So, the human search for God is ultimately futile, but things are not hopeless. God has taken the initiative in salvation. He sent Christ as the Savior. He sent gospel preachers, such as Paul. Through His Spirit’s work, He has called persons to respond. Those who respond to the gospel call turn from their sins—including the sins of looking for powerful signs and worldly wisdom—and believe in Jesus. Then both Jews and Greeks experience that the Messiah is indeed **the power of God** (rather than miraculous signs) and that He is **the wisdom of God** (rather than human philosophy). We can know God and receive salvation only through Christ and Him crucified.

Paul returned to the contrast between two kinds of wisdom—God’s and the world’s—that he had made in verse 21. God’s wisdom appears to be foolishness to those who count on human wisdom. Yet such folly turns out to be wiser than anything the Greeks ever devised for reaching God. **God’s foolishness** results in salvation; **human wisdom** results in death.

Trusting in a crucified Messiah would appear to be **weakness**. (Was there ever anyone seeming to be more pitifully weak than the Savior as He hung suspended by nails between heaven and earth?) Yet such “weakness” turned out to be stronger than anything the Jews ever looked to as a show of human strength. **God’s weakness** results in salvation; **human strength** results in death.

**All of us who believe the gospel have come to enjoy God’s wisdom and God’s power. Therefore, we are to exalt nothing above the Lord Jesus Christ and His saving death. What “power” or “wisdom” do nonbelievers today rely on to answer questions of eternal significance?**

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### 1 CORINTHIANS 1:22-23

<sup>22</sup> For the Jews ask for signs and the Greeks seek wisdom, <sup>23</sup> but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles.

### 1 CORINTHIANS 1:24-25

<sup>24</sup> Yet to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God, <sup>25</sup> because God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

# LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

## FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

**WELCOME:** Prior to the group's arrival, list names of clubs and organizations on a whiteboard (examples: philanthropic, civic, school, and sports organizations). As the group arrives, invite individuals to review the list and add additional organizations. Lead the group to name the purpose of each organization, using electronic devices for research as necessary.

**ASK:** *Have you been part of a club or organization that was driven by its purpose? How did that purpose help them deal with differences within the group?* (PSG, p. 10)

**TRANSITION:** Note that church is a group of people from many different walks of life, backgrounds and interests, who find their unity in the gospel, in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Say: *Sometimes we let our preferences get in the way of our love and mission, and believers are unnecessarily divided. In this week's study, Paul addressed divisions in the church at Corinth and called believers back to unity.*

**INTRODUCE:** Direct attention to the new study of 1 and 2 Corinthians by locating Corinth on **Pack Item 1** (*Map: Paul's Second Missionary Journey*) or on the map inside the back cover of the PSG. Then review **Pack Item 2** (*Outline: 1,2 Corinthians*; also on p. 20; PSG, p. 9), briefly highlighting the major points, as indicated by Roman numerals.

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

**READ:** Invite a volunteer to read aloud 1 Corinthians 1:10, as the rest of the group listens for the way Paul addressed the Corinthians.

**EMPHASIZE:** Point out that Paul was beginning a discussion about squabbles within the family of God in Corinth. Direct attention to **Pack Item 4** (*Poster: Problems in Corinth*) and distribute copies of **Pack Item 12** (*Handout: Problems in Corinth*). Review the list, explaining that these issues will be addressed by Paul throughout the Books of 1 and 2 Corinthians.

**STUDY:** Lead the group to locate three specific ways Paul called the church to unity. Emphasize that Paul was focusing on basic doctrinal convictions and goals as opposed to unity of opinion about everything.

**DISCUSS:** *What factors could potentially threaten unity in a church? What steps might be taken to ensure that a local church remains unified?* (PSG, p. 13)

**READ:** Direct the group to listen for divisions in the church based on personalities (religious leaders) as you read aloud 1 Corinthians 1:11-16.

**STUDY:** Invite the three pre-enlisted volunteers to present a brief character sketch of the three church leaders mentioned in verse 12 (Paul, Apollos, Cephas), using information under Verse 12 (PSG, pp. 13-14). Assign one church leader to each volunteer, instructing the volunteer to summarize the leader's specific connection to the church in Corinth.

**DISCUSS:** *Where do you see this kind of division in the church today? How does rivalry get in the way of God's work?* (PSG, p. 14)

**TRANSITION:** *Even though these leaders helped the church in Corinth to grow, Paul's contempt for this rivalry and division is clear in these verses. Basing allegiances on human personalities leads to prideful boasting and divisions within the church.*

**CLARIFY:** Invite volunteers to locate Paul's rhetorical questions in verse 13. Emphasize that Paul used this line of questioning to illustrate that no one but Christ is sufficient for salvation.

**DISCUSS:** *Paul showed contempt for people claiming to belong to him but later urged the church in Corinth to imitate him (4:16). What is the difference? (PSG, p. 15) How can you balance a healthy appreciation for a pastor, leader, or teacher who has greatly impacted your spiritual life with a careful protection against disunity between other believers (maybe other church members) who don't share the same experience?*

**READ:** Direct the group to read silently 1 Corinthians 1:17-25, looking for references to the cross of Christ.

**SAY:** *For Paul, the cross (v. 18) was a rallying point and unifier for the church. But the cross also divides: it divides those who are perishing from those who are being saved.*

**CLARIFY:** Call attention to the second and third paragraphs under Verses 18-23 (PSG, pp. 16-17) that deal with two objections to the message of the gospel.

**GUIDE:** Distribute **Pack Item 13** (*Handout: Memory Verses Bookmark*) for the group to use as a tool for tracking verses memorized throughout the study. Direct attention to 1 Corinthians 1:23, the memory verse for the week. Invite the group to complete the first part of the Bible Skill activity (PSG, p. 17) by writing the verse in their own words in the margin of their PSGs. Invite volunteers to share how they wrote the verse in their own words.

**ILLUSTRATE:** Draw a line on the whiteboard. On one side write "Saved" and on the other side write "Not Saved." Say: *The only dividing line believers should recognize is the division between those who are saved and those who are not.*

**DISCUSS:** *How is the cross of Christ divisive in our world today? (PSG, p. 17) Allow the group to give specific examples.*

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## SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

**REVIEW:** Lead the group to review the bulleted summary statements under In My Context (PSG, p. 18). Invite individuals to pick the statement that best describes their biggest insight gained during the session.

**RESPOND:** Call attention to the third question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 18): *What walls have you built between yourself and other people? Which of those walls get in the way of your building relationships with other believers? What actions do you need to take to begin to remove these walls?* Lead the group to identify one action they can take to begin to remove these walls.

**PRAY:** Thank God for the unity of believers, based on sharing the same salvation through their confession of Christ. Pray that your church would be united in Christ.



## PRACTICE

- Pray for your group and your church, especially for situations in which unity needs to be restored.
- Contact those not present, encouraging them to be part of the new study unit.
- Consider rearranging your group meeting space. Look at possible ways of moving people into circles or a single, larger circle to foster a sense of greater unity.

## MORE IDEAS

### FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

To replace the Focus Attention activity, offer assorted pastries or snacks to the group. Invite volunteers to name which of the assortment is their favorite. Point out that people have a variety of preferences about the snacks, just as they do about other aspects of life, including the church. Sometimes church members let their preferences get in the way of their love and mission, and believers are unnecessarily divided.

### EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To reinforce Paul's call for unity in 1 Corinthians 1:10, lead the group to search the verse for various words or phrases that refer to unity. Discuss how Paul used words with similar meanings to emphasize his point.
- To enhance the discussion of 1 Corinthians 1:11-16, number people in the group from one to four. Instruct the ones to say Paul, twos to say *Apollos*, threes to say *Cephas*, and fours to say *Christ* when you read aloud, *I'm with \_\_\_\_\_*. Note the discordant sound that results. Reinforce that basing allegiances on human personalities leads to discord within the church.
- To provide additional insight into 1 Corinthians 1:17-25, place a block of wood in the middle of the room. Read verse 23, and use your study of page 19 to clarify the phrase "stumbling block." Discuss: *How is the cross of Christ a stumbling block and foolishness for people today?* (PSG, p. 17)

### SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

To conclude the session, lead in a discussion of the second question set (PSG, p. 18): *As a group, determine practical ways you can hold each other accountable to preserve unity and to help each other resist the temptation of forming divisive factions around popular leaders or personalities.*

### SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

Read the lyrics to the first verse of "They'll Know We Are Christians," by Peter Scholtes. Play the song softly as you lead in prayer, asking the group to pray silently for unity within your congregation and community.

# GLORIFYING GOD

Believers honor God through holy living.

## 1 CORINTHIANS 6:12-20

**MEMORY VERSE: 1 CORINTHIANS 6:14**

- **READ** 1 Corinthians 5:1–6:20, First Thoughts (p. 24), and Understand the Context (pp. 24–25). Note the specific ways the Corinthians were failing to honor God by misusing their bodies.
- **STUDY** 1 Corinthians 6:12-12, using Explore the Text (pp. 25–29). Focus on how Paul pointed the Corinthians to holy living by making lifestyle adjustments. For further insight, consult the *Explore the Bible Adult Commentary* (available in print and digital format from LifeWay.com).
- **PLAN** the group time using ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 30–31). Tailor the plans for your group using More Ideas (p. 32) and ideas included online at [Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploreTheBible/Adults](http://Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploreTheBible/Adults).
- **GROW** with other group leaders at the Groups Ministry blog ([LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry](http://LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry)).
- **GATHER** the following items:  Personal Study Guides. Make copies of:  **PACK ITEM 7** (*Handout: Corinthians Time Line*); and  **PACK ITEM 13** (*Handout: Memory Verse Bookmark*). Prepare to display the following Pack Items:  **PACK ITEM 2** (*Outline: 1,2 Corinthians*);  **PACK ITEM 5** (*Map: Center of Ancient Corinth*). For More Ideas (p. 32):  Newspapers and magazines.



## KEY DOCTRINE

### *The Family*

The family is God's unique gift to reveal the union between Christ and His church and to provide for the man and the woman in marriage the framework for intimate companionship, the channel of sexual expression according to biblical standards, and the means for procreation of the human race.

## BIBLE SKILL

*Dig deeper into the background and usage of key words and phrases.*

The term translated "sexual immorality" (1 Cor. 6:13) is from the Greek term *porneia* (from which our English term "pornography" is derived). Read selected passages from the list below and make notes on how this term is used in the New Testament: Matthew 5:32; 15:19; 19:9; Mark 7:21; John 8:41; Acts 15:20,29; 21:25; Romans 1:29; 1 Corinthians 5:1; 6:13,18; 7:2; 2 Corinthians 12:21; Galatians 5:19; Ephesians 5:3; Colossians 3:5; 1 Thessalonians 4:3.

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# FIRST THOUGHTS

Some people hate their bodies. They see themselves as ugly or fat or too short or too tall or whatever. Some people are proud of their bodies. They work out and are fit. Most of us are probably somewhere in the middle, we neither love our bodies nor loathe them. As long as we are in this life, we are tied to our bodies. We can bring dishonor to our bodies through such things as gluttony or sexual immorality, or we can use our bodies as instruments for good. How we use our bodies matters.

(In PSG, p. 19) **To what degree do you think it matters how a person uses his or her body? Explain. How would you describe the connection between your body and your spiritual life?**

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It's easy to embrace the notion, "What I do with my own body is my business." We are familiar with that kind of thinking in present-day culture. In the first century, some Corinthian Christians thought similarly. They had come out of lifestyles of physical indulgence, whether in eating or drinking or sexual expression. They supposed that now as followers of Jesus, everything was still permitted. Paul helped these immature believers come to a better understanding of how their bodies were to be used. No doubt they were surprised to learn that they did not have the right to do with their bodies what they wanted. Indeed, their physical bodies did not even belong to them.

# UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

## 1 CORINTHIANS 5:1–6:20

As we learned in last week's lesson, the first concern Paul wrote to the Corinthians about was their need for unity in light of sinful cliques in the congregation. He had learned about this matter from "members of Chloe's people" (1:11). The next topic Paul broached was the unthinkable issue of sexual immorality in the church that had been reported to him (5:1).

Paul sternly dealt with that particular situation, recommending that the offending person be expelled from the congregation until he repented (5:1-8). At the same time, Paul offered advice to the believers about how they were to respond in general to immoral people who were part of the congregation (5:9-13).

Paul next wrote about the questionable practice of believers taking one another to court (6:1-11) and at the same time reminded them that those who continue to live greedy or immoral lives "will not inherit God's kingdom" (6:9). He concluded this section with a reminder that true

conversion results in a change of behavior in such matters: “some of you used to be like this. But you were washed” (6:11).

Paul then returned to the issue of Christian sexuality, but in a broader way than the specific case he had written about in 5:1-8. In 6:12-20, he established principles that help believers understand how to use our bodies properly, both in the way we express our God-given appetite for food as well as how we express our God-given appetite for sexual fulfillment. He ended, as we will see, with the challenge: “glorify God with your body” (6:20).

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

### FOCUSED ON CHRIST’S LORDSHIP (1 COR. 6:12-14)

#### VERSE 12

We are not the first society to quote popular slogans to express the way we live. In the city of Corinth, a common slogan was, **“Everything is permissible for me.”** Paul quoted the saying back to the Corinthians four times in the letter, twice in this verse and twice in 10:23. Apparently it was used to express much the same thing that we mean by “do your own thing.”

After becoming Christians, some members of the Corinthian congregation assumed that the principle still applied. These men were going to prostitutes, based on the notion that bodily appetites are matters of indifference for Jesus’ followers. Not so fast, Paul argued. He opposed this erroneous thinking with two responses.

First, he reminded them that even if some things are morally acceptable—not that prostitution ever is—not everything is **beneficial**. We are responsible to evaluate the actions we take with our bodies to determine if such deeds will help us spiritually. Some practices may be permitted for believers, yet they will have a negative impact on our Christian lives or on the lives of others. Whatever actions we are considering, we have a responsibility to ask this question: will the action be of benefit?

Paul’s second response was to note that those indulging their appetites run the risk of being brought under the control of that appetite. Of course, in the context of marriage, sex is wonderful; sex outside of marriage, however, can lead to being enslaved to sin. This principle is not limited to sex. We can become enslaved to alcohol or food or social media or a hundred other things.

#### VERSE 13

**“Food is for the stomach and the stomach for food”** was another slogan from their pre-Christian days that some of the Corinthian believers were tossing about. On the surface, it meant something like, “you have to eat to live, so go ahead,” implying that indulging the appetite for food and drink is necessary for human life. Beneath the surface, however, the saying was used to justify the practice of freely satisfying one’s sexual function. Just as food is meant to be eaten, so sex (of whatever preference) was meant to be enjoyed. What could be wrong with satisfying one’s biological urges?

### BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read “Sexual Ethics: Paul’s Challenge to the Corinthians” in the Spring 2018 issue of Biblical Illustrator. Available at [LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator](http://LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator).

#### 1 CORINTHIANS 6:12

<sup>12</sup> “Everything is permissible for me,” but not everything is beneficial. “Everything is permissible for me,” but I will not be mastered by anything.

#### 1 CORINTHIANS 6:13

<sup>13</sup> “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.

Paul's opposition to this way of thinking was to remind the Corinthians that God—the One who created human bodies and human appetites in the first place—has the right to limit and guide how we use our bodies. First, even though the human body is transient (God will do away with the body as well as the means of satisfying bodily appetites), what Christians do with their bodies still matters to God. In particular, the Creator has made it clear that **the body is not for sexual immorality**. Second, God created the human body **for the Lord**, not for one's own selfish use. Third, God has so arranged things that for believers, the **Lord is for the body**. Paul explained in more detail what he meant by this in verse 19.

## 1 CORINTHIANS 6:14

<sup>14</sup> God raised up the Lord and will also raise us up by his power.

### VERSE 14

In verses 12-13, the apostle had advised the Corinthian believers about the best way to use their bodies in this present life. Here he made a transition to think about the future of our bodies. There is an everlasting, eternal body in store for Christians, which means that what we do with our bodies in this (fleeting) life has implications forever. Just as God **raised up the Lord** on the third day, so there's coming a day in which, at Jesus' return, God **will also raise us up by his power** (see also 15:20-22,50-53).

Although we do not know precisely what life in a resurrection body will be like, we can be sure that it goes well beyond the natural, biological order of human life as we experience it now. When we understand Christ's lordship over all aspects of life, including our very body, we will live differently than those who chant mottoes such as, "Everything is permissible for me."

**What is the best response you can make to another Christian who appears to live by the slogan, "Everything is permissible for me"? How does focusing on Christ's lordship, rather than on temporal things, help you live out your bodily existence for the Lord?**

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## 1 CORINTHIANS 6:15

<sup>15</sup> 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!

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

#### VERSE 15

Later in 1 Corinthians, Paul developed even further the wonderful truth that believers have already become a part of Christ's body. (See 12:12-27, especially v. 27: "Now you are the body of Christ and individual members of it.") Here he emphasized that our being united with Christ involves our whole person, that is, it includes **your bodies**, and is not just some kind of spiritual union. Our physical selves and our spiritual selves—call this our "souls" or our "spirits," if you will—are inseparably intertwined in this life.

Thus, if our physical bodies are joined to Christ Himself, then whatever we do with our physical bodies involves Christ as well. Paul drove home the point, in a most explicit way, by arguing that if a believer is united

sexually with a prostitute, then that believer is at the same time joining Christ to that prostitute. So what was Paul's response to such a scenario? He blurted out, Absolutely not! This was Paul's strongest way to push back an idea that he found sickening and horrifying (for other examples, see Rom. 6:1-2,15).

#### VERSES 16-17

Why was Paul so appalled by the idea of casual sex? Because in his (biblically-based) view of the true meaning of sex, sex is serious. Sexual intimacy can result in another human being coming into the world. Sexual intimacy involves two human beings becoming **one body** together — which is obvious at the most literal level, when you think about it. In order to make his case even clearer, Paul went back to the first account of sexual union between our first parents in Eden. Genesis 2:24 described the sexual bond between husband and wife as **one flesh**.

### Believers are called to live by a different understanding of sex than unbelievers.

From God's perspective, the concept of one flesh is not limited to marriage partners. Every act of sexual intimacy, whether inside marriage or not, involves the union of two persons into one flesh. Thus, because a believer's body has already been joined to Christ's body, whomever that believer joins with sexually also joins Christ to that other person. If that other person is a believing spouse, how wonderful it is. In every other context, this act must be considered unthinkable. Believers are called to live by a different understanding of sex than unbelievers.

Paul's specific example had to do with the shameful possibility of a Corinthian Christian man seeking a prostitute. Yet his teaching has broad application to any and all sexual intimacy outside the bond of heterosexual marriage, whether premarital, extramarital, or homosexual (6:9).

The one-flesh bond between husband and wife was ordained by God from the beginning. Christians are to recognize, however, that as wonderful as this union is, there is another union that is even greater. That is the union between the believer and the Lord. Paul was returning to the thought of verse 15 ("your bodies are a part of Christ's body") and yet transcending it.

Christians are to understand that we are **one spirit with him**. Whatever sexual union we may have on this earth, whether with a marriage partner or with a prostitute, it is a union of "one flesh" only. (Jesus affirmed that the marriage bond lasts only for this life; Matt. 22:30.) With Christ, however, we are "one spirit," an eternal union that will reach its final fulfillment only in the resurrection. In a later epistle, Paul developed the theme that the believer's spiritual union with Christ serves as a model for the unity that is to be reflected in the marriage relationship between Christian husbands and wives (Eph. 5:21-33).

#### 1 CORINTHIANS 6:16-17

<sup>16</sup> Don't you know that anyone joined to a prostitute is one body with her? For Scripture says, The two will become one flesh.<sup>17</sup> But anyone joined to the Lord is one spirit with him.

**How could you express to new believers that they are joined to Christ spiritually and eternally? How should this reality affect the way you think about sexual intimacy with another person?**

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

### **VERSE 18**

When faced with danger, our instincts are typically “fight or flight.” Some individuals are fighters. Others, more timid, run away. Paul’s command concerning the temptation to sexual sin was to **flee**. It’s no sign of Christian maturity for us to think that we have overcome sexual temptation and then put ourselves in situations in which falling into sin is possible. There are situations that we know ahead of time may become enticing. There are places we should avoid even driving close to. There are sites on the Internet that no Christian should visit even out of curiosity or just to see what temptations are out there. That kind of false bravery is likely to lead into sin. Fleeing situations in which sexual temptation is possible is not cowardice; it is wisdom. (Recall the example of Joseph, who fled from Potiphar’s wife in Genesis 39.)

**Fleeing situations in which sexual temptation is possible is not cowardice; it is wisdom.**

Bible students have different opinions on whether Paul was quoting another slogan with the words, **Every other sin a person commits is outside the body**. If Paul was indeed quoting a popular saying, then he provided the rebuttal immediately, just as he had done in 6:12 and 6:13. Other Bible students believe Paul was making a true assertion: Every other sin a person can commit—except for sexual immorality—is outside the body. In either case, Paul’s analysis of the horror of sexual sin is not open to misinterpretation. Sexual sin is an offense against God and the person one has been intimate with; moreover, it is a crime against one’s very body. No doubt Paul meant to create a sense of shame for those Corinthian Christians who had sinned in this way.

### **VERSES 19-20**

Paul now gave the most important reason of all for the individual Christian to be sexually chaste: **your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit**. Earlier in the letter, the apostle had noted that the local congregation as a whole was God’s temple and that any troublemaker who tried to wreak havoc on the congregation faced God’s displeasure (3:16). The city of Corinth was full of pagan temples that were thought of as houses in which the god—or at least the image of the god—lived. So it would have been good news for the new Christians to know that their congregation served as a temple for the Holy Spirit.

### **1 CORINTHIANS 6:18**

<sup>18</sup> 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.

### **1 CORINTHIANS 6:19-20**

<sup>19</sup> 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, <sup>20</sup> for you were bought at a price. So glorify God with your body.

Here, however, Paul wrote that the body of the individual Christian serves as a “house for God” because of the Holy Spirit **who is in you**. Because the Holy Spirit has taken up residence in each believer personally (Rom. 8:9), the very body of the believer has been made holy, set apart by the Holy Spirit. If a believer indulges in immorality, that sinful behavior contradicts what God has said is true of the believer’s body. The indwelling Spirit is a gift from God Himself. It is a dangerous thing for believers to dishonor God’s gift to them—His own Spirit—by indulging in sexual misbehavior (see 1 Cor. 4:2,7).

## If a believer indulges in immorality, that sinful behavior contradicts what God has said is true of the believer’s body.

Paul turned from one well-known cultural image (a temple or sanctuary) to another: slavery. Slaves were bought and sold in the ancient world. Such slaves did not belong to themselves. This was the meaning of Paul’s words, **You are not your own**. Believers now belong to Christ as their Master. We no longer have authority over our lives, for we belong to Him.

The apostle did not take up the space to spell out the extravagant **price** paid so that believers now belong to Christ. He had already written in the letter about the centrality of the cross of Christ for salvation (see last week’s lesson, particularly comments on 1:17,18,24). In Romans 6:15-23, Paul expounded at some length on the concept that Christians are no longer slaves to sin but are now slaves of God. Other biblical writers noted that Christ’s death was the way in which those who believe have been purchased: “you were redeemed ... not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ” (1 Pet. 1:18-19; see also Rev. 5:9).

Paul began this paragraph with a warning: run away from sexual immorality. He ended with an astonishing command: **So glorify God with your body**. Far from our bodies still being the instruments of sin, we are now able to bring praise to Him by using our bodies in ways that compel others to observe that we are united to Christ. Later on in the letter, Paul wrote, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31).

**How can you bring glory to God in the way you care for your body? How can your very body be used in a way that causes others to praise God?**

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# LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

## FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

**LIST:** As the group arrives, direct them to identify ways people's lifestyles affect their health, both positive and negative. You may want to recruit a volunteer to keep a list of the comments. After most have arrived, review some of the things identified.

**DISCUSS:** *To what degree do you think it matters how a person uses his or her body? Explain. How would you describe the connection between your body and your spiritual life?* (PSG, p. 19)

**EXPLAIN:** *In today's study, we will discover how Paul helped immature believers at Corinth come to a better understanding of how believers honor God through holy living.* Direct attention to **Pack Item 5** (Map: Center of Ancient Corinth) to identify the location of the temples, pointing out some of the idols worshiped in Corinth. Point out how integrated idol worship was in the city and how those ingrained cultural beliefs could have impacted the new Christians.

**CLARIFY:** Use the display of **Pack Item 2** (Outlines: 1,2 Corinthians; also on PSG, p. 9) and copies of **Pack Item 7** (Handout: Corinthians Time Line) to help the group gain an understanding of where the passage for today fits into the context of Paul's letters to the Corinthians.

**TRANSITION:** *Some people embrace the notion that what they do with their own body is their business. The first-century Christians thought similarly. They came out of lifestyles of physical indulgence and supposed that once they were followers of Jesus, everything bodily was still permitted.*

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

**READ:** As you read 1 Corinthians 6:12-14, direct the group to follow the Scripture (PSG, p. 21) and circle the first part of verse 12.

**EXPLAIN:** *Paul possibly quoted something he had said previously or slogans from the broader Corinthian culture. The verses fall within Paul's larger discussion of Christian liberty and freedom in 1 Corinthians 5-11. Either way, the Corinthian believers misapplied the quoted phrases, using them to pursue ungodly actions and selfish ends.*

**DISCOVER:** Invite volunteers to read aloud John 8:36 and Galatians 5:1, as the group listens for references to freedom. Stress that freedom in Christ is never meant as a license to sin freely.

**ASK:** *What other areas beyond food and sex might master a Christian's life if left unchecked or unchallenged?* (PSG, p. 22)

**MINI-LECTURE:** Use comments in the PSG (pp. 21-22) and your personal study to present a mini-lecture about the distinction between permissibility and freedom for believers. Emphasize that Paul declared believers might be free to pursue some things as a Christian and not sin, but that doesn't mean believers should.

**ASK:** *What is the relationship between freedom and responsibility? What might be said to believers who think they are free to do as they please?* (PSG, p. 23)

**TRANSITION:** *Paul stressed that believers can live holy lives by focusing on Christ's Lordship and not being controlled by temporal things, such as food and sexual appetites.*

**READ:** Direct the group to read silently 1 Corinthians 6:15-17, envisioning the inflections Paul would have used if he were saying the words aloud.

**IDENTIFY:** Lead the group to identify words or phrases that contrast sacred unity with the perverted union of sexual promiscuity. Highlight words or phrases that reinforce the truth that believers are a part of Christ's body, the church. Note that as members of the church, there is accountability with one another for how we behave.

**DISCUSS:** *Why might a person bristle at the thought of accountability with another person? How does being held accountable by others help a person use his or her freedom for good?* (PSG, p. 24)

**CLARIFY:** Summarize information under Verse 16 and Verse 17 (PSG, pp. 24-25) to clarify what it means that our bodies are part of Christ's body (6:15). Clarify being joined to Christ spiritually and being one with Christ.

**DISCUSS:** *How should being united with Christ impact how a person views what he or she does with his or her body?* (PSG, p. 24)

**READ:** As you read aloud 1 Corinthians 6:18-20, encourage the group to listen for the connection between believers' bodies and the Holy Spirit.

**EXPLAIN:** *Paul reminded the Corinthian believers that they were sanctuaries for the Holy Spirit. Because of the price paid by Christ to secure their salvation, they should have sought to honor Him with how they used their bodies.*

**GUIDE:** Direct a volunteer to read aloud 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8. Then ask: *How does what Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8 compare to what he wrote to the Corinthian believers?* (PSG, p. 26)

**REFLECT:** Lead the group to reflect on what it means to be bought for a price. Use information under Verse 20 (PSG, p. 26) for guidance. Record insights in the margin of their PSG.

**DISCUSS:** *How does realizing you were bought for a price encourage you to honor God with how you use your body?*

## **SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)**

**REVIEW:** Read the bulleted summary statements under In My Context (PSG, p. 27). Invite volunteers to examine their focus in life and consider silently: *Are you more focused on Christ or on temporal things? What evidence would you point to in support of your answer? What needs to change and how?* (PSG, p. 27)

**DISCUSS:** Call attention to the second question set under In My Context in the PSG on page 27: *Discuss as a group ways of holding one another accountable for using your body to honor God. How can the group hold one another accountable without judging, condoning, or ignoring?* Encourage the group to consider forming accountability partnerships, or pairs of believers who will help each other be mutually accountable for honoring God with their bodies.

**PRAY:** Lead the group in prayer, requesting God's strength as you honor Him through holy living in an unholy world.



## PRACTICE

- Spend time this week evaluating the areas in which you struggle most to honor God through holy living. Identify steps you can take to improve in these areas.
- Contact the group with a reminder of the discussion about accountability. Encourage them to hold each other accountable without judging, condoning, or ignoring. Include the memory verse for this week (1 Cor. 6:14).
- Pray for everyone in your group by name, asking God to help them honor Him through holy living.

## MORE IDEAS

### FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

To enhance the Focus Attention idea, provide newspapers and magazines. As the group arrives, direct them to locate news stories that reflect ways people's lifestyles affect their bodies, looking for examples of healthy living as well as abuse. You may invite them to use electronic devices to search the Internet for stories as well. As stories are located, encourage the person locating the story to share how lifestyle affects the body.

### EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To supplement your discussion of 1 Corinthians 6:12-14, lead the group to name slogans people use to rationalize their behavior, such as, "If it feels good, do it!" Then invite the group to write a slogan describing what it means to be focused on Christ's Lordship.
- To further your discussion of 1 Corinthians 6:15-17, explain that the marriage union is a mirror of the relationship we are to have with the Father. Enlist volunteers to read aloud Genesis 2:24; 1 Corinthians 7:2; and Ephesians 5:31-32 for further insight.
- To enhance the discussion of 1 Corinthians 6:18-20, lead the group to complete the Bible Skill activity (PSG, p. 23) about the Greek term *porneia*, translated "sexual immorality." Assign different verses to various group members to read. Then lead them to discuss their findings and how what they read affects their understanding of the phrase "sexual immorality."

### SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Return to the question posed at the beginning of the session: *To what degree do you think it matters how a person uses his or her body? Explain. How would you describe the connection between your body and your spiritual life?* (PSG, p. 19) Invite volunteers to share insight gained during the study. Distribute copies of **Pack Item 13** (*Handout: Memory Verses Bookmark*) to those who don't have them to reinforce Christ's power in the lives of believers.

### SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

To close the session, play a recording of "Take My Life (Holiness)," by Micah Stampley, or lead the group in singing or reading the words to "Take Time to Be Holy," by William D. Longstaff.

# KEEPING COMMITMENTS

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

## 1 CORINTHIANS 7:1-13

**MEMORY VERSE: 1 CORINTHIANS 7:17**

- **READ** 1 Corinthians 7:1-40, First Thoughts (p. 24), and Understand the Context (pp. 24–25). As you read, compare Paul’s comments about marriage and purity with attitudes in today’s society. Reflect on areas in which you see distinct contrasts.
- **STUDY** 1 Corinthians 7:1-13, using Explore the Text (pp. 25–29). Create an outline of Paul’s specific advice to these groups: husbands, wives, and the unmarried and widows. As you prepare to lead, make note not to imply that Paul had a dim view of marriage, or that someone who experiences divorce is an inferior person or second-class Christian.
- **PLAN** the group time using ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 30–31), More Ideas (p. 42), ideas included in *QuickSource*, and ideas included on [Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible/Adults/LeaderExtras](http://Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible/Adults/LeaderExtras).
- **GROW** from expert insights on weekly studies through the Ministry Grid ([MinistryGrid.com/Web/ExploretheBible](http://MinistryGrid.com/Web/ExploretheBible)).
- **GATHER:**  Personal Study Guides;  Sheets of paper and pens or pencils. Make copies of:  **PACK ITEM 11** (*Handout: Key Idols in Corinth*); and  **PACK ITEM 13** (*Handout: Memory Verses Bookmark*) as needed. Prepare to display:  **PACK ITEM 4** (*Poster: Problems in Corinth*). For More Ideas (p. 42):  Construction paper; and  A gift-wrapped box or gift bag.



## KEY DOCTRINE

### Family

Marriage is God's unique gift to reveal the union between Christ and His church and to provide for the man and the woman in marriage the framework for intimate companionship, the channel of sexual expression according to biblical standards, and the means for procreation of the human race.

## BIBLE SKILL

*Use other Scripture to help understand a Bible passage.*

First Corinthians 7 is far from the complete biblical teaching on marriage. Read Genesis 2:18-25 and Matthew 19:1-6 regarding the normality and permanence of marriage. Read Matthew 5:32; 19:7-11; and 1 Corinthians 7:10-16 regarding divorce (and the possibility of remarriage). Summarize the biblical teaching regarding God's intention for marriage. Summarize in your own words the biblical teaching regarding divorce and remarriage.

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# FIRST THOUGHTS

Marriage is hard. Both husband and the wife must commit to each other. The relationship must be fostered and guarded. The lack of biblical standards in society adds to the challenge. It seems that much more attention is given to redefining marriage than to upholding God's design for His creation, cluttering the conversation and commitment needed to make biblical marriage work.

(In PSG, p. 28) **What are the main challenges people face today regarding marriage? How important is it for them to think of marriage as a lifetime commitment?**

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The first-century followers of Jesus in Corinth were facing their own challenges when it came to understanding marriage. In the Roman Empire, there was no standard view. Jews typically practiced monogamous, committed marriage. On the other hand, polygamy and divorce were widely accepted. Because female slaves were considered property, they were often treated as concubines. Paul learned that the Corinthian Christians had some questions about what marriage meant for believers. This week's context passage (1 Cor. 7) is the beginning point for discussing marriage. It is not the complete biblical teaching. We will observe that Paul's teaching celebrated intimacy in marriage, explained the role of staying single, and addressed certain matters regarding divorce.

# UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

## 1 CORINTHIANS 7:1-40

As we saw in last week's lesson, Paul offered strong advice to the Corinthians on the subject of sexual immorality. In chapter 7, he offered equally strong advice, but here he enthusiastically embraced Christian marriage. His words were chosen carefully, for they came in response to "the matters you wrote about" (7:1). Consider the following as an overview of 1 Corinthians 7.

- *Principles of marriage (7:1-7).* Paul emphasized the importance of physical intimacy for married couples.
- *A word to the unmarried (7:8-9).* Paul urged celibacy for those who were single.
- *Advice about married people (7:10-16).* Paul addressed the issue of divorce, recommending staying married.
- *Various situations of life (7:17-24).* The apostle encouraged individuals to be content with their life situation, whether they were Jewish or Gentile, slave or free.

- *About the unmarried and widows (7:25-40).* These verses extend the teaching of the previous section, encouraging contentment, whatever one's current marital status.

As we approach the focal verses for this week's study, keep in mind the following. First, Paul had a wonderful, positive view of biblical marriage. Second, he did not think of those who experience divorce as inferior or second-class Christians, and neither should we.

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

### MARRIAGE AND INTIMACY (1 COR. 7:1-7)

#### VERSE 1

The citizens of Corinth typically connected sexual relations to pagan worship practices. As we saw in last week's lesson, some of the new believers had no problem with continuing the sexual immorality of their previous lives. They used the popular slogan, "Everything is permissible for me" (6:12). Paul strenuously objected to that position. It appears that others of the new Christians had taken an opposite view. They had come to believe that people were better off if they avoided sexual relations entirely, even if they were married. The way they expressed this belief was in the saying, "**It is good for a man not to use a woman for sex.**" The text is literally, "not to touch a woman," but Bible students agree that "touch" was Paul's way of referring to sexual intimacy.

Members of the congregation were divided over this view of abstaining from sex entirely, so they asked Paul about it. Paul quoted the statement in his epistle so that the Corinthians would know he had introduced a new topic. Note that this is the first of several times in the letter in which Paul referred to a list of questions he had received from the Corinthian believers. He introduced each new question with a phrase like, **Now in response to** (also 7:25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1,12).

#### VERSES 2-3

Paul rejected the view that Christians are to give up sex. He responded with two principles that are rooted in the Old Testament. First, the normal pattern for God's people is monogamous marriage: **each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman should have sexual relations with her own husband.** The phrasing is focused more on already-married partners continuing their sexual relations rather than exhorting those who were single to seek marriage. (See 7:17-38 for Paul's argument on being content with one's status.)

The second principle Paul articulated is that sexual relations are expected—a duty, even—within Christian marriage: **A husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise a wife to her husband.** Sex, after all, was God's idea. Paul knew that sex within marriage is a good way to deal with the temptations to indulge in sex outside of marriage.

### BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read "Of Demons and the Devil: A Historical Overview" and "Letter Writing in the First Century" in the Spring 2018 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Available at [LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator](http://LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator).

#### 1 CORINTHIANS 7:1

<sup>1</sup> Now in response to the matters you wrote about: "It is good for a man not to use a woman for sex."

#### 1 CORINTHIANS 7:2-3

<sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> A husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise a wife to her husband.

He understood how strong the sex drive is. Yet he also believed that there is only one legitimate way for the human sexual appetite to be fulfilled: within the bonds of marriage.

### Biblical Purposes of Marriage (In PSG, p. 32)

<i>God's glory</i>	<i>1 Corinthians 10:31; Ephesians 5:21-33</i>
<i>Companionship</i>	<i>Genesis 2:18</i>
<i>Procreation</i>	<i>Genesis 1:28; Psalm 127:3-5</i>
<i>Sexual intimacy</i>	<i>Genesis 1:27-28; 2:24-25; Proverbs 5:15-19; 1 Corinthians 7:2,5</i>

#### 1 CORINTHIANS 7:4

<sup>4</sup>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.

#### VERSE 4

Earlier, Paul had taught that the physical bodies of believers are “not for sexual immorality but for the Lord” (6:13). Here, Paul expanded on this idea but in the context of Christian marriage. The physical body of the husband belongs to the wife and the body of the wife belongs to the husband. Paul was clearly talking about sexual fulfillment. Neither partner in the marriage has the right to fulfill only his or her own desires. Rather, both the husband and the wife are to strive to please the other.

Sadly, the words of this verse have been used to justify abuse by husbands. They have forced their wives to submit to their desires. The principle of sacrificial love within marriage (see Eph. 5:25-30) means that there are limitations to Paul’s teaching here. Also note that Paul gave the wife the same authority over her husband’s body that the husband has over her body. In other words, sexual intimacy within marriage is to be on mutually agreeable terms.

#### 1 CORINTHIANS 7:5

<sup>5</sup>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.

#### VERSE 5

Paul offered his advice in negative terms: ***Do not deprive one another.*** Stated positively, his advice may be stated, “fulfill one another.” Again, sex is great when it occurs according to God’s design. For a Christian couple, however, there may be times when spiritual considerations lead to a pause in marital intimacy. Paul was clear that this was to be by mutual consent (***when you agree***) and only temporarily (***for a time***). The spiritual reason he noted was so that the couple might devote themselves to ***prayer***. Paul was perhaps recalling that in the Old Testament special times of devotion to God included prayer and fasting, which included sexual abstinence as well (1 Sam. 21:4-5). You may think of additional spiritual reasons for which temporary abstinence might be a consideration.

Once more the apostle urged that any mutually agreeable time of sexual abstinence within marriage be temporary. He referred again to how strong the sex drive is. He did not want a season of prayer to end in a time of succumbing to sin. He knew that ***Satan*** never gives up tempting people in this area. People are wise to realize that ***lack of self control*** can

lead to disaster. Paul was a realist, and we should be realists regarding our own sexuality.

#### VERSES 6-7

Bible students have disagreed about what Paul's **concession** referred to. Some think it looks back to his teaching in verse 5 (that a period of abstinence is acceptable but never mandatory). Others understand Paul to be referring to what follows (that being single is acceptable but never mandatory). Either interpretation is possible. Paul was clear on both points.

Paul qualified his endorsement of marriage by referring to the advantage of being single, **as I am**. He concluded his thoughts with a broad statement that one's marital status—single or married—is a **gift from God**. For one person, singleness is God's plan; for another, marriage is God's plan. Certainly God's intention from the beginning of humanity has been that marriage is the normal pattern. Yet Jesus Himself taught that celibacy is a state that some are called to for the sake of the kingdom of heaven (see Matt. 19:10-12).

**What should be some of the distinctives of the Christian view of sex?**

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## MARRIAGE AND SINGLENES (1 COR. 7:8-9)

#### VERSE 8

Paul turned his attention from advice offered to husband and wife to advice offered to those who were presently without a marriage partner. He specifically mentioned **the unmarried** (which included those who had never married as well as those who had been divorced) as well as **widows** (those whose husband or wife had died).

### Marriage is good. But we should not therefore reach the conclusion that staying single is bad.

In the beginning, God had declared, "It is not good for the man to be alone" (Gen. 2:18), and so He brought our first parents together in marriage. In other words, marriage is good. But we should not therefore reach the conclusion that staying single is bad. Paul balanced the statement from Genesis with the idea that **it is good for them** (single persons) **if they remain** single. The apostle at this point did not give the reasons for staying single. In 7:32-33,40, however, he taught that those who are single can be more devoted to the Lord's work.

Paul referred to his own single status again (**as I am**). Nothing is known about the apostle's marital history. He had likely been married because he was a Jewish rabbi. It is possible that Paul had been married but that his wife had died. It is certain that Paul was single (and celibate) during his missionary travels (9:5-6).

#### 1 CORINTHIANS 7:6-7

<sup>6</sup> I say this as a concession, not as a command. <sup>7</sup> 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.

#### 1 CORINTHIANS 7:8

<sup>8</sup> I say to the unmarried and to widows: It is good for them if they remain as I am.

## 1 CORINTHIANS 7:9

<sup>9</sup> But if they do not have self-control, they should marry, since it is better to marry than to burn with desire.

### VERSE 9

This verse implies a hierarchy of possible statuses regarding a person's marriage and sexuality. Paul's preference was for celibate singleness. If that ideal could not be sustained because of a lack of sexual self-control, then marriage was the next best option. The third option was really no option at all: **to burn with desire**. The image of the sex drive as like a burning fire is certainly easy to understand. Paul was not implying that marriage will eliminate all sexual temptation; rather, marriage helps believers abstain from sexual immorality.

**How should a Christian view singleness? What must you believe about God in order to adopt that view?**

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## 1 CORINTHIANS 7:10

<sup>10</sup> To the married I give this command — not I, but the Lord — a wife is not to leave her husband.

### VERSE 10

The first part of Paul's advice regarding divorce assumes that both the wife and the husband are believers. As an apostle, he had the authority to establish guidelines for both belief and behavior. That's what apostles were: Christ's representatives sent out by Him. Yet here, Paul felt that his words would carry added weight if he appealed to Jesus' direct teaching on this issue. Thus, what Paul wrote here had originated with the Lord: **not I, but the Lord**.

**A wife is not to leave her husband** echoes what Jesus taught in Mark 10:11-12 (see also Matt. 5:32; 19:9; Luke 16:18). The term translated *leave* includes the concepts both of separation and of divorce in today's terminology. (Jesus permitted divorce in cases of sexual immorality; Matt. 19:9. Paul permitted divorce in instances of desertion; 1 Cor. 7:15.) Paul's broad principle, however, was unambiguous: believers are not to practice divorce.

## 1 CORINTHIANS 7:11

<sup>11</sup> But if she does leave, she must remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband — and a husband is not to divorce his wife.

### VERSE 11

Verse 10 speaks to the Christian wife; verse 11 gives the same command to the Christian husband. Paul understood that each partner in the marriage is responsible for maintaining the integrity of the marriage. Marriage permanence depends on the commitment of both partners.

The apostle, however, knew that sometimes divorce happens for a Christian couple without legitimate reasons. Paul believed there were two options for such divorced believers: They were to remain unmarried or be reconciled to the former spouse. Paul did not offer further guidelines, such as cases in which reconciliation is rejected. Further, the apostle did not address the matter of spousal mistreatment or even abuse. He was focusing on the specific situation of a Christian couple in which one had left the marriage without an acceptable reason.

## VERSE 12

Paul next turned his attention to a different scenario. He knew there were situations in which one partner in a marriage had been converted to Christ, but the other partner had not. What then? This was a situation that Jesus had not spoken about. Thus, Paul spoke with the authority he had as an apostle: ***I (not the Lord) say.***

In a “mixed marriage,” what is most desirable is for the marriage to remain intact. Paul gave the example of a man who had come to faith in Christ but who had ***an unbelieving wife.*** The believing husband must not leave the marriage. As difficult as such a marriage might be, if at all possible it should be preserved. Nevertheless, this matter did not rest entirely with the Christian husband. If the unbelieving wife was not willing to stay in the marriage, the marriage could legitimately be dissolved without being considered a sin. “A brother or sister is not bound in such cases” (7:15).

## VERSE 13

Paul now reversed the situation. What if the wife had been converted to Christ and the husband had not? Paul’s advice was the same. She was to do whatever she could to maintain the marriage. She must not leave her husband. But again, the unbelieving husband may want a divorce. In this situation Paul advised, “If the unbeliever leaves, let him leave” (7:15).

In a later letter, Paul wrote extensively about how the marriage between two Christians reflects the everlasting, sacrificial love between Christ and the church (see Eph. 5:22-33). In the present letter, Paul briefly addressed two reasons why a Christian in a mixed marriage should seek to preserve the marriage. First, the unbelieving partner might eventually turn to Christ: “Wife, for all you know, you might save your husband. Husband, for all you know, you might save your wife” (1 Cor. 7:16). After all, the intimate context of marriage is a wonderful way for the transforming power of Christ to be on display to an unbeliever.

Second, there is the responsibility the Christian spouse has to raise his or her children so that they will eventually turn to Christ (see 7:14). Perhaps Paul thought that children raised in an intact home where only one parent is a believer would be more likely to turn to Christ than children brought up by divorced parents. Thus, Christian spouses have reasons of eternal weight for preserving their marriage, whether their partner is a believer or not.

**What are some practical ways both husbands and wives can reflect the sanctity of marriage through their attitudes and actions?**

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## 1 CORINTHIANS 7:12

<sup>12</sup>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.

## 1 CORINTHIANS 7:13

<sup>13</sup>Also, if any woman has an unbelieving husband and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce her husband.

# LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

## FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

**GUIDE:** As the group arrives, hand each person a small sheet of paper. Be sure everyone has a pen or pencil. Lead the group to write on the paper brief advice related to marriage. Collect the papers and read aloud responses.

**SAY:** *Sometimes bridal showers feature activities such as we just completed, where attendees provide guidance for the soon-to-be married couple. Relationship guidance abounds, and it can be difficult to sort valid from invalid counsel. Today's session provides scriptural basis for how believers can honor God by keeping their vows related to marriage and purity.*

**EXPLAIN:** Paul wrote 1 Corinthians 7 as a response to questions from the Corinthians related to marriage after conversion. The chapter is only a beginning point for the discussion on marriage, not a complete statement about marriage or its ethical implications.

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

**READ:** Form two listening teams. As you read aloud 1 Corinthians 7:1-7, instruct one team to listen for Paul's counsel to husbands. Direct the second team to listen for Paul's counsel to wives.

**CHART:** On a whiteboard or large sheet of paper, create a chart with the headings "Husbands," "Wives," "Unmarried and Widows," and "Marriage and Divorce." Invite the group to call out Paul's counsel for husbands and wives in this passage; list points under the respective headings: "Husbands" and "Wives." Clarify any points as needed, pointing to the information under Verses 3-7 on pages 31–33 of the PSG.

**CLARIFY:** Point out that sexual relations in Corinth were strongly tied to pagan worship. Direct attention to **Pack Item 11** (*Handout: Key Idols in Corinth*). Review the information under Aphrodite to further explain the sexual climate of Corinth.

**ASK:** *Discuss why Paul claimed it is good not to "use" someone for sex. What implications does this have regarding pornography?* (PSG, p. 30)

**CLARIFY:** Emphasize that sex and marriage are gifts from God, and affirm sex as being reserved for marriage between a man and a woman.

**DISCOVER:** Form two discussion teams. Assign a question to each team. (1) *How does this teaching of duty and rights in marriage contrast with contemporary views about marital relationships?* (PSG, p. 32) (2) *What corrections need to be made for a healthy view of sex within marriage? What are some implications to be avoided?* (PSG, p. 32) After allowing each team time to work, call for a volunteer from each to share. Clarify as needed using information from this leader guide (pp. 35–36).

**TRANSITION:** *Paul next turned his focus to the unmarried and the widows. He commended celibacy to the Corinthian believers, pointing to his own marital status. Paul was most likely a widower, to account for his being a Pharisee.*

**READ:** Ask a volunteer to read aloud 1 Corinthians 7:8-9. Invite volunteers with different translations (accessed on electronic devices if necessary) to read the passage as well. Lead the group to identify the differences in each translation and how combining of the differences gives a clearer view to the passage.

**CHART:** Invite volunteers to summarize Paul's counsel to the unmarried and widows, and record brief information on the chart. Note that Paul affirmed marriage for those who were not given the gift of celibacy on practical terms related to temptation.

**DISCUSS:** *Assess your agreement with the following: "Believers are to be content regardless of marital status." How does this statement summarize Paul's point? What is the relationship between what Paul was teaching and God's expectation of His people living in a God-honoring way?* (PSG, p. 34)

**READ:** Invite a volunteer to read 1 Corinthians 7:10-13, while the group listens for Paul's specific instruction about marriage and divorce.

**CHART:** Lead the group to summarize Paul's instructions about marriage and divorce and record responses on chart. Point to page 35 in the PSG for more information.

**CLARIFY:** Be careful to affirm marriage between a man and a woman without condoning mistreatment or tolerating abuse. Focus on the specific situation being addressed by Paul, when one spouse becomes a believer and the other spouse wants a divorce as a result.

**DISCUSS:** *How does this passage help us understand how to relate to people who were friends prior to our accepting Christ? What does this passage teach us about the mutual commitment of a marriage?* (PSG, p. 35)

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## SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

**REVIEW:** Look over the chart created during the session. Call attention to the bulleted statements under In My Context (PSG, p. 36). Lead the group to connect the information on the chart with the statements.

**RESPOND:** Call attention to the first question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 36): *Regardless of your marital status, what are you doing to make sure your sexual expression honors God and His design for creation? How can you help others understand God's expectations?* Lead the group to prayerfully consider their responses.

**MEMORIZE:** Invite a volunteer to read aloud 1 Corinthians 7:17, the memory verse for this week. Encourage the group to memorize the verse as a summary of how believers should honor God by keeping their vows related to marriage and purity. Distribute copies of **Pack Item 13** (*Handout: Memory Verses Bookmark*) as needed.

**GUIDE:** Call attention to **Pack Item 4** (*Poster: Problems in Corinth*) to show that matters of sexuality in marriage and divorce are just one of the many problems Paul addressed in the Corinthian church. Explain that we will continue this discussion in the next session with the study of verses from 1 Corinthians 9–11.

**PRAY:** Close in prayer, thanking God for the opportunity to live in relationship with each other. Ask Him to help each person apply Paul's guidance to his or her specific situation so that God will be honored.



## PRACTICE

- Pray that the session content will speak clearly to married and singles about honoring God by keeping their vows related to marriage and purity.
- Text or email the group, thanking them for the opportunity to be in relationship together through the Bible study group.
- Encourage the group to begin memorizing 1 Corinthians 10:31 for the upcoming session.

## MORE IDEAS

### FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

To replace or supplement the Focus Attention activity, distribute pieces of construction paper. Instruct individuals to tear the paper into a shape that represents an aspect of wedding planning (examples: invitations, decorations, attire, and venue). Invite volunteers to share responses. Then summarize the information on page 28 of the PSG about marriage. Point out that planning a wedding is a one-time event, but keeping marital commitments is a life-long journey.

### EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To supplement the discussion of 1 Corinthians 7:1-7, display a gift-wrapped box or gift bag. Read aloud verse 7. Ask: *How can married couples view their status as a gift? How can singles view their status as a gift? What ways can each group of believers encourage one another in their respective status?* (PSG, p. 33)
- To enhance the discussion of 1 Corinthians 7:8-9, lead in a discussion of the impact of social media on relationships. Discuss the second question set under In My Context: *What are you doing to make sure your identity continues to be found in Christ and not simply in your earthly relationships?* (PSG, p. 36)
- As an option for 1 Corinthians 7:10-13, call attention to the Bible Skill (PSG, p. 33). Assign the first set of Scriptures to one team, and the second Scriptures to another team. Allow time for teams to complete the summaries described at the end of the Bible Skill activity and report to the large group.

### SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Invite the group to share a song that was selected for their wedding, or a favorite song they would pick if they were planning a wedding. Play excerpts from these songs, as time permits, on an electronic device. Lead the group to write a title for a song based on Paul's comments about keeping commitments in 1 Corinthians 7.

### SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

Read aloud the words, especially the fourth verse, to "O Lord, May Church and Home Combine," by Carlton C. Buck. Invite the group to name contemporary songs that reinforce honoring God by keeping vows related to marriage and purity.

# INFLUENCING FOR CHRIST

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

## 1 CORINTHIANS 9:19-27; 10:31-33; 11:1

**MEMORY VERSE: 1 CORINTHIANS 10:31**

- **READ** 1 Corinthians 8:1–11:1, First Thoughts (p. 44), and Understand the Context (pp. 44–45). As you read, take note of the various ways Paul used his influence to bring others to Christ.
- **STUDY** 1 Corinthians 9:19-27, 10:31-33; 11:1, using Explore the Text (pp. 45–49). Consult the *Explore the Bible Adult Commentary* (available in print and digital format from LifeWay.com) for additional insight into the way Paul’s message addressed contemporary issues in Corinth. Consider how these issues relate to society today.
- **PLAN** the group time using ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 50–51) and More Ideas (p. 52). Consult *QuickSource* for additional discussion questions (available from LifeWay.com).
- **GROW** with other group leaders at the Groups Ministry blog (LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry).
- **GATHER:**  Personal Study Guides. Make copies of:  **PACK ITEM 12** (*Handout: Problems in Corinth*). Prepare to display the following Pack Items:  **PACK ITEM 3** (*Key Verse: 2 Corinthians 5:20*); and  **PACK ITEM 4** (*Poster: Problems in Corinth*). For More Ideas:  A display of running gear (such as athletic shoes and water bottle);  A small wreath made from real or artificial twigs and leaves to represent Jesus’ crown.



## KEY DOCTRINE

### *Evangelism and Missions*

It is the duty of every child of God to seek constantly to win the lost to Christ by verbal witness undergirded by a Christian lifestyle, and by other methods in harmony with the gospel of Christ.

## BIBLE SKILL

Use multiple Scripture passages to understand a major doctrine.

The term translated “crown” (*stephanos*) in the original language of 9:25, referred to a victor’s crown rather than a king’s crown (*diadema*). Review 1 Thessalonians 2:19; 2 Timothy 4:8; James 1:12; 1 Peter 5:4; and Revelation 2:10 for other passages in which believers’ rewards are described as a *stephanos*. How can you relate these passages to this week’s lesson?

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# FIRST THOUGHTS

Each day we encounter people who try to influence us. Some do so on purpose while others do it simply by being who they are. Every person we encounter may be influenced by us as well. We never know the impact of our life’s influence on someone else, nor what that influence will yield beyond our reach.

(In PSG, p. 37) **What living person has had the most positive influence in your life? Has anyone had a negative influence? Who have you had the most influence on, for better or worse?**

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Our study today brings into clearer focus the stewardship of influence. How we live before others matters. Paul’s concern for the Corinthians was that they underestimated their influence in bringing others to Christ. Rather than living in self-focused ways, Paul challenged his readers (and us) to run the race in the right way and with the right goals in mind. Let’s consider how to adorn the gospel of Christ rather than hinder it with our lives.

# UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

## 1 CORINTHIANS 8:1–11:1

As we saw in last week’s lesson, a large part of this epistle was devoted to answering a list of questions the church had sent to Paul. In 1 Corinthians 8, he took up the difficult matter of how the believers should relate to pagan religious practices. Could they, for example, eat food that had previously been offered to a pagan god? Paul’s advice took into account the impact that believers’ decisions in such cultural issues might have on the conscience of other believers.

In chapter 9, Paul reflected on his rights and responsibilities as Jesus’ apostle. He established that he had willingly given up his rights—rights enjoyed by other apostles—for the sake of being a good witness for Christ. He considered it a small thing to refuse to swing his weight around if it meant that more people could hear the gospel and receive an opportunity to respond.

Paul often looked back to the Jewish Scriptures to bolster his points. In chapter 10, he reviewed the experience of the Israelites in the wilderness during the time of Moses. He considered their behavior a bad example and therefore a warning to the church not to fall for the same kind of temptation as the Israelites. He promised that God would provide His people an escape from falling into sin, if only they stayed alert to the warnings from the past.

Paul returned briefly to the theme of food sacrificed to idols (10:14-22) and then moved on to the issue of Christian liberty in “doubtful matters.” He emphasized that he personally enjoyed liberty in such matters, but again expressed readiness to give up his liberty for the sake of others. The apostle was a master of thinking through—and then living out—being a good influence for Christ.

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

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

#### VERSE 19

Paul carefully distinguished between living according to God’s moral standards (to which his conscience was bound), and living in light of cultural preferences (in which he exercised liberty). Thus, as we saw in our study two weeks ago, sexual immorality is forbidden, and last week’s lesson emphasized strict guidelines regarding the permanence of marriage.

When it came to certain cultural practices, however, Paul was flexible. For example, he had earlier noted that he willingly gave up his right to eat certain foods if that would help keep other believers from stumbling into sin (8:13). Here he argued similarly. He followed cultural practices (in areas where there are no biblical prohibitions) if that would help people come to faith in Christ. He began by asserting his personal situation as a **free** man and **not anyone’s slave**. He was speaking literally of his status as a Roman citizen (Acts 22:25-28). Thus, he did not have to conform to the expectations of others. This, of course, contrasted with the situation of those who lived in slavery. They did not have such freedom. Spiritually and figuratively, Paul was Christ’s slave (see Rom. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; Titus 1:1).

Here, however, he was thinking of his voluntary—and therefore figurative—slavery to everyone. He was willing to conform to the cultural expectations even of unbelievers. This was not because Paul was wishy-washy or because he wanted to blend into his surroundings like a chameleon. Rather, he lived this way **to win more people** to Christ. This goal was always a high priority for the apostle.

#### VERSE 20

Paul began with examples of how he chose to live according to the way he was brought up. He outlined his Jewish privileges in Philipians 3:4-6, yet in that passage he noted that he had given up all those things for the sake of knowing Christ (Phil. 3:7-11). Thus, in the present verse he noted that he **became like a Jew** when he was in a Jewish setting so that he might win Jews to Christ. His new identity as a Christian so outweighed his earlier Jewish identity that he had to be intentional about putting on that Jewish identity in appropriate settings.

He went on to mention that he also voluntarily chose to live like one **under the law** for those who still lived according to the regulations of the

### BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read “Meat Sacrificed to Idols” in the Spring 2018 issue of Biblical Illustrator. Available at [LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator](http://LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator).

#### 1 CORINTHIANS 9:19

<sup>19</sup> 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.

#### 1 CORINTHIANS 9:20

<sup>20</sup> 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.

laws of Moses (which were designed by God to be temporary, until the coming of Christ, Gal. 3:23-25). Thus, he was involved in having Timothy circumcised and he participated in animal sacrifices at the Jerusalem temple (Acts 16:3; 21:20-26). Again Paul emphasized that his purpose was evangelism. He wanted to win those under the law to Christ, and if living in the short term according to the laws of Moses could be a positive factor, he was ready and willing. At the same time, he stressed, ***I myself am not under the law.***

### 1 CORINTHIANS 9:21

<sup>21</sup> 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.

### 1 CORINTHIANS 9:22

<sup>22</sup> 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.

### 1 CORINTHIANS 9:23

<sup>23</sup> Now I do all this because of the gospel, so that I may share in the blessings.

#### VERSE 21

The primary ethnic divide for the first Christians was between Jew and Gentile. Gentiles by definition were those without the law of Moses. In Ephesians the apostle wrote about the plight of Gentiles: “excluded from the citizenship of Israel, and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, with no hope and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12). For such people, the apostle willingly lived like one ***without the law.*** Clothes, eating habits, daily routines, and annual holidays were very different between Jews and Gentiles. These were secondary to Paul for the sake of the gospel. In the same breath, Paul made it clear that when he lived as if he were a Gentile, he lived within Christ’s law, that is, according to the teachings of Jesus as well as the other abiding principles that he summarized as God’s law. Earlier in the letter he had made a similar point in distinguishing between the law of Moses (now obsolete) and the law of God (of permanent validity): “Circumcision does not matter and uncircumcision does not matter. Keeping God’s commands is what matters” (7:19).

#### VERSE 22

The apostle changed focus, moving from his accommodation to various ethnic groups to his accommodating those who were ***weak.*** He was thinking about those in the Corinthian church whose consciences were such that they could be influenced to do something they thought was wrong, even though it was something they were free to do (see 8:9-13). In this instance, Paul wanted ***to win the weak*** who were actually already connected to the congregation. He did not want them to fall into a sinful pattern of life. He wanted the faith of weak believers to be strengthened. Becoming all things to all people is a good example of exaggerated language for effect. There were certainly some things Paul would not do because they were sinful. He was a principled man and was stubborn when the gospel was being compromised. But short of that, Paul went to great lengths to live not according to his own preferences but to live so that he would ***by every possible means save some.***

#### VERSE 23

Why did Paul go to so much trouble to walk in the shoes of those with whom he came in contact? He did so ***because of the •gospel.*** He wanted the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ to be proclaimed and believed throughout the world. He wanted God’s kingdom to expand, as Jesus had promised. He made himself like a slave for others so that these things

could happen more effectively. Yet his motives were not entirely selfless. He anticipated God’s reward for his faithful service. He looked forward to the time that he would **share in the blessings**. He wanted to hear the Lord’s “well done” (Matt. 25:21) in addition to the joy of seeing people believe in Christ.

**What do we communicate about our faith when we are willing to give up personal preferences for the sake of the gospel?**

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

### VERSE 24

Using an athletic metaphor, Paul showed how serious he was about living for the gospel’s sake. The Corinthians were well acquainted with the foot races of their own Isthmian games (held every other year), which were second in importance only to the Olympics. Paul may have been in Corinth to see the **runners** race **in a stadium**. All the contestants had trained. Yet there was only one who received the prize, which consisted of a perishable wreath of leaves or other foliage. He lived his life so that he could win first place in the race that mattered. He wanted all the Corinthian Christians—and us as well—to run in such a way to win the prize. He explained his meaning in the following verses. (See 2 Tim. 4:7-8 for a similar athletic metaphor.)

### Athletic Metaphors in the New Testament (In PSG, p. 41)

<i>Run with purpose, run to win the prize.</i>	<i>1 Corinthians 9:24; Galatians 2:2; Philippians 2:16</i>
<i>Winning requires discipline, self-control.</i>	<i>1 Corinthians 9:25-27</i>
<i>Compete according to God’s rules.</i>	<i>2 Timothy 2:5</i>
<i>Run with perseverance.</i>	<i>Hebrews 12:1; Galatians 5:7; 2 Timothy 4:7</i>

### VERSE 25

All athletes train for their events. Their whole lives are affected: what they eat, how they eat, how they work out, how they sleep. Each one **exercises self-control in everything**. They do it for a moment of fame. They hear the applause of the crowds and they receive **a perishable crown**. Followers of Jesus live careful, intentional, self-controlled lives for the sake of a crown that will never fade away, unlike the fading victor’s wreath of the winner in a stadium race. This statement is a further commentary on what Paul had already noted at the end of verse 23.

### 1 CORINTHIANS 9:24

<sup>24</sup> 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.

### 1 CORINTHIANS 9:25

<sup>25</sup> Now everyone who competes exercises self-control in everything. They do it to receive a perishable crown, but we an imperishable crown.

## 1 CORINTHIANS 9:26-27

<sup>26</sup> So I do not run like one who runs aimlessly or box like one beating the air. <sup>27</sup> Instead, I discipline my body and bring it under strict control, so that after preaching to others, I myself will not be disqualified.

### VERSES 26-27

Paul transitioned to apply the athletic image directly to himself. In a foot race, no one can win who **runs aimlessly**. Every stride must be purposeful (see also Phil. 3:13-14). Paul switched his analogy to a different sporting event, from running to boxing. In the ring the boxer must make every punch count. Paul made everything in his life count. He did not **box like one beating the air**. His “spiritual punches” were meant to land in order to have the desired effect.

In verse 27, the apostle returned to the idea of training for an event. His constant intention was to **discipline** his body and **bring it under strict control**. Paul was not talking about punishing his body in the hopes of gaining spiritual benefit, as some later Christians supposed him to be teaching. Just as athletes train in ways that make them sore and uncomfortable in order to attain their goal, so Paul endured physical hardship for the sake of advancing the gospel (2 Cor. 6:3-10). The term used for **disqualified** means “not approved” or “not passing the test.” He was talking about the possibility of being disqualified from receiving the reward, rather than losing his salvation. (See 1 Cor. 3:10-15 for another discussion of gaining or losing rewards, in which he concluded: “If anyone’s work is burned up, it will be lost, but he will be saved.”)

**In what ways does your lifestyle reflect that you are living with discipline in your walk with Christ? Why is discipline so important for the Christian?**

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## 1 CORINTHIANS 10:31

<sup>31</sup> So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God.

### VERSE 31

In the lesson two weeks ago about Christians and sexuality, we discussed Paul’s startling claim, “Glorify God in your body” (6:20). Here we see Paul expanding on this idea. The whole of a believer’s actions are to be carried out **for the glory of God**. God’s glory is His supreme worthiness because of His excellence in all things. He created the world, making humanity in His image to display His glory. He redeemed sinful humanity to display His glory. In return, those who understand something of His greatness and goodness are to live so that God’s glory is reflected back to Him. Others too see how believers live, and they are to be pointed to the Lord in whatever believers do.

Paul mentioned what you **eat or drink**, which we often think of as entirely personal choices. Not so. Just as Paul made the case that we are to make lifestyle choices so that others will receive the gospel, so here he stated that such choices include the foods we eat and the beverages we drink for a greater reason: God’s honor is to be on display in what we eat and drink and do.

## VERSES 32-33

Living to honor God is completely compatible with living to be a positive influence on others. We are to eat and drink and carry out our lives making choices based not on our personal preferences, but so that we **give no offense**. Paul noted three categories of persons that he lived to try to please (not that he would always be successful).

- **Jews**, as we know, were those of Paul's familiar ethnic and cultural background. By extension, we are to live with an awareness of and sensitivity to "people like us."
- **Greeks** were those who were different from Paul. Paul lived like a Gentile when he believed he could lead them to Christ. By extension, we are to accommodate our personal preferences to those ethnically and culturally different from us, that they may be saved.
- The **church of God** was the family of disciples, those of Paul's new identity. As we have seen, even among fellow believers he gave up his rights, especially for the "weak." By extension, we are to live with awareness of how fellow believers may be affected by our choices.

Like Paul, Christ calls me not to seek my own profit but the profit of many. It is not too much to see Paul's teaching in these verses as a restatement of what Jesus taught as the greatest commandments (Matt. 22:37-40). Glorifying God in all things is another way of expressing our love for the Lord our God with our entire being. Trying to please others in all things is another way of expressing that we love our neighbors as we love ourselves. At the same time, neither Jesus nor Paul meant that trying to please everybody (or loving our neighbors) includes compromising biblical truth. We are to stand firm for the gospel; however, we should always consider others and do our best not to be a stumbling block to them.

## CHAPTER 11, VERSE 1

Because Paul had consistently lived in this way, he felt he could encourage the members of the Corinthian congregation to **imitate** him. He had already stated this principle in 4:16 (see also Phil. 3:17; 4:9; 2 Thess. 3:7-9; 2 Tim. 3:10). At the same time, the apostle was quick to move the attention from himself to Christ. He followed the example of Christ, who gave up His freedom and rights, humbling Himself to death on the cross so that others would be saved (Phil. 3:5-8). Thus, Paul concluded this teaching by encouraging the believers to keep in mind Jesus' sacrifice as the supreme example of concern for others.

**How can you live during the next week so that someone might look at you and say, "You are an example of what it means to follow Christ"?**  
**What changes might you need to make in your actions or words in order for this to become a reality?**

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## 1 CORINTHIANS 10:32-33

<sup>32</sup> Give no offense to Jews or Greeks or the church of God, <sup>33</sup> 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.

## 1 CORINTHIANS 11:11

<sup>11</sup> Imitate me, as I also imitate Christ.

# LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

## FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

**GUIDE:** As the group arrives, point to the following names that you've written on a board: Christopher Columbus, Abraham Lincoln, Henry Ford, Sigmund Freud, The Beatles, and Steve Jobs. Begin the session by inviting volunteers to guess what the names have in common. Point out that they all appear in the book *TIME: The 100 Most Influential People of All Time*. Ask: *Who would you add to the list? Why?*

**STATE:** *Each day we encounter people who are trying to influence us, and every person we encounter may be influenced by us as well. Ask: What living person has had the most positive influence in your life? Who have you had the most influence on, for better or worse? (PSG, p. 37)*

**TRANSITION:** Remind the group that Paul's letter to the Corinthians was intended to address matters the believers asked about in a letter to him. Distribute copies, as needed, of **Pack Item 12** (*Handout: Problems in Corinth*). Use the handout and **Pack Item 4** (*Poster: Problems in Corinth*) to briefly review the major issues Paul had already tackled. State that he would now focus on another question posed to him by the Corinthian church: Is it appropriate to eat food sacrificed to idols?

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

**READ:** Direct a volunteer to read aloud 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, asking the rest to listen for Paul's references to freedom.

**EXPLAIN:** Point out that some among the Galatians and Corinthians were using their freedom in Christ as an opportunity to please others, rather than serving others in love.

**SEARCH:** Lead everyone to search 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 for the various groups identified as part of Paul's missionary strategy, beginning with the Jews. Lead them to use the commentary under Verses 20-23 (PSG, pp. 40-41) to locate the other groups and an explanation of each. Invite volunteers to share insight.

**DISCUSS:** Explain that Paul was not making cultural concessions to compromise the gospel. Ask: *How can a believer contextualize the gospel without compromising the gospel? What principles can be found in this passage for establishing a proper line? (PSG, p. 41)*

**READ:** Direct the group to read silently 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, locating comparisons to running. Point out that Paul's use of runners in a stadium would have been readily understood to his readers, since Corinth hosted the Isthmian Games, which were similar to the Olympic Games in Greece.

**AFFIRM:** Note that Paul compared the Christian life to running in a race, explaining that discipline is required if one does not want to be disqualified. Affirm salvation as being secure for believers. Review the chart on page 41 of the PSG.

**STUDY:** Call attention to the Bible Skill (PSG, p. 42). Invite volunteers to read each of the passages referenced. Ask: *How does this passage relate to 1 Corinthians 9:24-27?*

**GUIDE:** Discuss the concept of discipline in relationship to the Christian life. Invite volunteers to locate references to discipline in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27.

**DISCUSS:** *How does living a disciplined lifestyle reflect God's character? What methods might a person use to stay focused on pleasing God?* (PSG, p. 43) Direct attention to **Pack Item 3** (Key Verse: 2 Corinthians 5:20). Discuss how the methods identified can help believers to be better ambassadors for Christ.

**READ:** Choose someone to read aloud Corinthians 10:31-33; 11:1, inviting the rest of the group to listen for the importance of a positive Christian influence.

**GUIDE:** Lead the group to locate the three action verbs Paul used in 1 Corinthians 10:31-33; 11:1.

**SAY:** *Paul challenged the Corinthian believers to use their influence to win others to Christ. He called on them to follow his example as he followed the example set by Christ.*

**EXPLAIN:** Use information under Verse 31 (PSG, pp. 43-44) to clarify Paul's reference to eating and drinking. Stress that Paul's discussion cannot be limited to merely food and drink because all of life is meant to bring God glory.

**DISCUSS:** *What are some practical ways of living out this passage? How can a person honor God in all things with humility?* (PSG, p. 44)

**MEMORIZE:** Call attention to the memory verse for this session (1 Cor. 10:31). Challenge everyone to memorize the verse as a way of remembering that believers represent God by using their influence to bring others to Him.

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## SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

**REVIEW:** Call attention to the summary statement under the session title on page 37 of the PSG: *Believers represent God by using their influence to bring others to Him.* Point to the bulleted statements under In My Context (PSG, p. 45). Lead the group to propose how each statement relates to the session summary statement.

**SHARE:** Call attention to the third question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 45): *List a few people who have had an influence on your spiritual life. What qualities influenced you the most? What specific ways did their actions affect you? What do you need to do to have a greater influence on others for the sake of the gospel?* Lead the group to list names of people in the margin in their PSGs. Invite volunteers to share examples of influence based on the individuals they recalled.

**PRAY:** Close in prayer, thanking God for His presence and power as believers use their influence to represent Him.



## PRACTICE

- Follow up on any questions the group had during this week's study.
- Select a time for the group to meet at a local restaurant or coffee shop to continue the discussion about influencing others for Christ. Include 1 Corinthians 10:31, the memory verse, in a reminder communication to the group.
- Meet with other group leaders to plan ways to welcome and follow up on guests.

## MORE IDEAS

### FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

To supplement the Focus Attention activity, bring and display some running gear. Lead the group to name factors that influence running. Comment that running and racing were among Paul's favorite metaphors to describe the Christian life. In today's session, he focused on influence—how believers represent the Lord by using their influence to bring others to Him.

### EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To enhance the discussion of 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, explain that an important theme for Paul was freedom in Christ. Invite volunteers to read Galatians 5:1,13. Ask: *What might making yourself a servant to all in order to win more people look like in today's culture? What roadblocks get in the way of people being more intentional in reaching others?* (PSG, p. 39)
- To supplement the discussion of 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, display the crown made of twigs and leaves. Use information in the last paragraph under Verses 24-25 (PSG, pp. 41-42) to explain the perishable crown.
- To provide additional insight into 1 Corinthians 10:31-33; 11:1, call attention to the section title for this passage in the PSG (Following Our Leader). Recall the childhood game of Follow the Leader. Enlist someone to lead the group in simple activities, such as raising hands, walking in place, and so forth. Discuss: *What would be the ramifications of placing yourself in a position to be an example for all to see? Why might people shy away from being looked at as an example to follow?* (PSG, p. 44)

### SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

To supplement the challenge, call attention to the second question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 45): *Where has God given you influence over others? How can you make a greater investment in that stewardship of influence?* Lead in a time of prayer, asking God to clearly help the group represent Him in a specific way during the coming week.

### SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

Encourage the group to reflect on how their lifestyles influence others for Christ while you play the song "Let Others See Jesus In You," by B. B. McKinney.

# ASSURANCE OF THE RESURRECTION

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

## JOHN 20:2-9; 1 CORINTHIANS 15:20-28

**MEMORY VERSE: 1 CORINTHIANS 15:20**

- **READ** John 19-20 and 1 Corinthians 15:1-58, First Thoughts (p. 54), and Understand the Context (pp. 54–55). Focus on how the passages provide assurance for this life and the life to come through Christ's resurrection.
- **STUDY** John 20:3-9 and 1 Corinthians 15:20-28, using Explore the Text (pp. 55–59). Try to notice details of familiar verses (such as the resurrection account in John 20) as if you were reading them for the first time. Pay close attention to words and phrases that might be unfamiliar or require extra explanation.
- **PLAN** the group time using ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 60–61) and More Ideas (p. 62). Create a plan for warmly welcoming guests and following up with them in the coming weeks. Other ideas for customizing your session may be found online at [Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible/Adults/LeaderExtras](http://Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible/Adults/LeaderExtras).
- **GROW** from expert insights on weekly studies through the Ministry Grid ([MinistryGrid.com/Web/ExploretheBible](http://MinistryGrid.com/Web/ExploretheBible)).
- **GATHER** the following items:  Personal Study Guides. Prepare to display the following Pack Item:  **PACK ITEM 6** (Poster: *Plan of Salvation*);  **PACK ITEM 10** (Handout: *Resurrection Appearances in Scripture*). For More Ideas (p. 62):  Pre-enlist a volunteer to share about how Jesus' resurrection has changed his or her life



## KEY DOCTRINE

### *The Kingdom*

The full consummation of the kingdom awaits the return of Jesus Christ and the end of this age.

## BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read “The Ark of the Covenant and the Empty Tomb” in the Spring 2018 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Available at [LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator](http://LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator).

# FIRST THOUGHTS

Life in the twenty-first century has proven to be anything but secure. Extremist attacks, escalating violence, and racial tensions have put many of us on edge. Many perceive life today to be more advanced than any time in history, yet we also seem to be more determined to find ways of using those advances in destructive ways.

(In PSG, p. 46) **Do you feel safer or less safe than you did ten years ago? Explain. How is a person’s sense of security related to what one is willing to trust for that security?**

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In some ways, life in the first century was like our own, taking into account they did not have the advanced technology that we do. But various groups in society did not trust each other. The Roman army was often brutal. Justice was often meted out by corrupt emperors and governors. Life was not guaranteed safe and secure for first-century Christians. There was not much that anyone could really be certain of. In other words, human nature has been remarkably consistent when it comes to exploiting others.

Paul was well aware that life is unfair and that little if anything in this life has been guaranteed. That’s why he placed all his confidence in the resurrection of Jesus. In the resurrection, Paul found a sure foundation for this life, as well as for the life to come. He expressed this hope in terms of the future resurrection of those who have believed in Jesus. In particular, he wanted the new believers in Corinth to understand the crucial connection between Jesus’ resurrection and the coming resurrection of all those united with the Lord Jesus.

# UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

## JOHN 19–20; 1 CORINTHIANS 15:1-58

The Gospel of John’s account of Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection provides a beautiful narrative to complement Paul’s discussion of the theological meaning of the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15. The core verses for this week’s lesson are taken from both inspired sources.

The following points briefly summarize John 19–20.

- *Jesus was flogged and mocked (19:1-5).* The Roman governor Pilate, believing Jesus to be innocent of a capital crime, tried to appease the bellowing crowd by resorting to torture.
- *Jesus was sentenced to death (19:6-16).* Pilate was cornered into agreeing to the crucifixion because the crowd threatened to report that he would not be “Caesar’s friend” if he did not do so.

- *Jesus was crucified (19:17-24)*. The placard above Jesus' head proclaimed that He was killed as "King of the Jews"; the soldiers fulfilled biblical prophecy by casting lots for His tunic.
- *Jesus made provision for His mother (19:25-27)*. The Lord entrusted Mary to John's care.
- *Jesus' work was finished (19:28-30)*. Jesus knew that everything was "accomplished," so He proclaimed "It is finished!" and then He died.
- *Jesus' side was pierced (19:31-37)*. The blood-and-water flowing from Jesus' side proved that He was truly dead; yet in fulfillment of Scripture none of His bones was broken.
- *Jesus was buried (19:38-42)*. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus gave Jesus' body a hasty burial in a garden tomb near the place of crucifixion.
- *The empty tomb was seen by Mary, Peter, and John (20:1-10)*. On Easter morning, Jesus' tomb was found to be empty. That, plus the evidence of the grave clothes, persuaded John to believe.
- *Jesus was seen by Mary Magdalene (20:11-18)*. Mary mistook Jesus for the gardener, but she was persuaded that Jesus had risen when He called her name. She reported this to the disciples.
- *Jesus was seen by ten disciples (20:20-23)*. On Easter evening Jesus appeared behind locked doors. He gave them His peace and commissioned them to go out "as the Father has sent me."
- *Jesus was seen by Thomas, who believed (20:24-29)*. A week later Jesus appeared to eleven disciples, with Thomas present. Jesus invited him to touch His wounds. Thomas believed.
- *The purpose of John's Gospel is stated (20:30-31)*. John declared that he wrote so that people may believe Jesus is Messiah and Son of God and "may have life in his name."

The following points summarize 1 Corinthians 15.

- *Jesus' resurrection is essential to the gospel (15:1-11)*. The essence of the good news—the gospel—is the death and resurrection of Jesus. He was seen alive by many eyewitnesses.
- *Jesus' resurrection is essential to the faith (15:12-19)*. If Christ has not been raised, then trust in Jesus is worthless and those who hope in Him "should be pitied more than anyone."
- *Jesus' resurrection guarantees ours (15:20-28)*. Because of His resurrection, Jesus is the "firstfruits," with believers yet to be resurrected at His second coming.
- *Jesus' resurrection (and ours) is supported by Christian practice (15:29-34)*. Both baptism and the difficulties believers experience in this life have meaning only in the resurrection.
- *The nature of the resurrection body is discussed (15:35-49)*. Paul developed analogies to help us understand that the resurrection body will be incorruptible, glorious, and "a spiritual body."

## BIBLE SKILL

*Use a concordance and/or Bible dictionary (either print or on the Internet) to learn more about a feature of Israel's religious life.*

Use a concordance to find references to "firstfruits" in Scripture. What were the circumstances and regulations for offering firstfruits in the Old Testament? Identify how the New Testament writers took the Old Testament usage and adapted it to apply to believers.

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- *Those who will receive resurrection bodies will be utterly victorious (15:50-58).* When believers receive resurrection bodies, death will be abolished forever. So then, keep doing God's work.

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

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

#### JOHN 20:3-8

<sup>3</sup> At that, Peter and the other disciple went out, heading for the tomb. <sup>4</sup> The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and got to the tomb first.

<sup>5</sup> Stooping down, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. <sup>6</sup> Then, following him, Simon Peter also came. He entered the tomb and saw the linen cloths lying there.

<sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> The other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, then also went in, saw, and believed.

#### VERSES 3-5

In light of Mary's disturbing news that Jesus' body had been taken (v. 2), **Peter and the other disciple** were **heading for the tomb**. Neither Mary nor the men had any thought of the resurrection.

Throughout the Fourth Gospel, the writer, John, typically referred to himself in the third person. Here he called himself **the other disciple**. He and Peter were in a hurry. It was a mile or so from the place they were staying inside the city to the garden outside the walls where Jesus had been buried. Bible students have speculated about why it was important for John to mention that he . Perhaps he was significantly younger. Perhaps he was more eager to discover for himself what Mary had seen. In any case, he **got to the tomb first**.

We are to think of a stone burial chamber with a low entrance, requiring John to stoop in order to peer through the opening. There was enough morning light by now that he could make out **the linen cloths lying there**, which at the least indicated that the body of Jesus had not been stolen, either by robbers or friends (or enemies) of Jesus. It is not clear whether the body of the resurrected Jesus had passed through the cloths (like He would later pass through locked doors). It's possible that Jesus unwrapped the cloths from His body after He arose and left them behind.

#### VERSES 6-7

Think of Simon Peter huffing and puffing and out of breath, arriving a few minutes after John. He was not one to meekly pause at the doorway and observe. Ever the audacious disciple, he charged in and was confronted with the same evidence that John had been content to observe from the door: the tomb was empty and the **linen cloths** in which Jesus' body had been wrapped were **lying there**. John, writing perhaps fifty years later, remembered the odd placement of the wrapping that had been on Jesus' head. At the least the implication, again, is that no grave robbers had been there. They would have been in haste and would never have folded up the cloth. Perhaps Jesus Himself had taken off the cloth and neatly folded it, leaving it as evidence to be discovered and interpreted.

#### VERSE 8

Whenever we are faced with various bits of data, we are invited to draw a conclusion. What does the data mean? John provided a glimpse into his thoughts at that moment. Bolstered by Peter's audacity, he entered the tomb. First he **saw**, then he **believed**. He had sufficient evidence to interpret

the meaning. As far as the record of the Gospels shows, John was the first one to believe that Jesus had risen from the dead.

#### VERSE 9

Looking back—again, from a distance of fifty years or so—John provided additional reflection. Neither he nor Peter nor any of the disciples understood the **Scripture** about Jesus’ resurrection. First they believed because they saw the evidence; only later did they recognize that it was in the prophecies all along (to say nothing of Jesus’ own predictions). John did not specify which Scripture he had in mind. Bible students have suggested such passages as Psalm 16:10; Isaiah 53:10-23; and Hosea 6:2.

Further, John was emphasizing that the disciples did not invent the story of the resurrection because of any predetermined view of what the prophecies meant. The statement that Jesus **must rise** means that the resurrection was God’s will. So fixed in the plan of God was the resurrection that He had revealed it to certain of the Old Testament prophets.

(In PSG, p. 50) **What is the connection between seeing and believing? How can a person believe in Jesus without fully understanding?**

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

#### VERSE 20

In the previous section (15:12-19), Paul had stated the horrible consequences if Christ’s resurrection had not actually happened. Here he turned the corner. There was no need to dwell on that false scenario, because Christ has been raised. The contrasting term **but** marks the pivot in Paul’s thinking. The verb he used, translated **has been raised**, is a form that implies a completed action with ongoing results. The resurrection continues!

The term **firstfruits** was taken from the history of the Jewish people. It referred to the first sample of agricultural produce which indicated the nature of the entire harvest that was soon to follow. Among the offerings required by the law was the firstfruits of grain (Ex. 23:19; Lev. 23:10). The firstfruits was evidence of the rest of the harvest, as well as a symbol that the entire harvest was consecrated to the Lord. **Fallen asleep** is a biblical metaphor for death, indicating that death is a temporary condition for believers (1 Thess. 4:13). In this verse we see that Christ’s resurrection, like the offering of the firstfruits, points to the entire “crop” of believers receiving eternal life, the opposite of death.

#### VERSE 21

Paul now moved to a slightly different understanding of the impact of Jesus’ resurrection. He developed the concept of the first instance of a particular event as the fountainhead from which a like event issues for

#### JOHN 20:9

<sup>9</sup> For they did not yet understand the Scripture that he must rise from the dead.

#### 1 CORINTHIANS 15:20

<sup>20</sup> But as it is, Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.

#### 1 CORINTHIANS 15:21

<sup>21</sup> For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead also comes through a man.

a later group. Thus, he considered the impact of Adam's act of sin, which resulted in **death** to all those humans who came after our first ancestor (Gen. 3:17-19). But now there has appeared in history another human being who has acted in such a way as also to become a fountainhead. Christ was **a man** just as Adam was. He too achieved something with phenomenal impact on those who followed Him, just as Adam did. He brings about **the resurrection of the dead** for all who will be raised to eternal life. One of the recurring themes in Paul's writings is that Christ's experiences on earth were much more than His experiences as an individual. What happened to Him in both His death and His resurrection also happens to all who are united to Him by faith.

## 1 CORINTHIANS 15:22

<sup>22</sup> For just as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive.

### VERSE 22

Paul's parallel between Adam and Christ is carefully drawn out (*as in Adam ... so also in Christ*). Adam's action led to death for all those identified with him—his biological descendants. Christ's resurrection leads to resurrection life for all those identified with Him—those who are His spiritual descendants. Paul was not teaching that every human being will be **made alive**, because only those joined to Him by faith—the “in Christ” group—will receive resurrection life (John 5:25; 1 Thess. 4:16-17; Rev. 20:6). Later on, when Paul wrote the Letter to the Romans, he expanded his thinking about the parallel between Adam and Christ (Rom. 5:12-21).

(In PSG, p. 51) **What do these verses reveal about the results of Jesus' resurrection? How do the results identified by Paul give hope? Hope for what?**

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## 1 CORINTHIANS 15:23-24

<sup>23</sup> But each in his own order: Christ, the firstfruits; afterward, at his coming, those who belong to Christ. <sup>24</sup> Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, when he abolishes all rule and all authority and power.

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

### VERSES 23-24

Just as a harvest of grain occurs in a certain order (firstfruits, then the rest), so it is with resurrection to eternal life. First is **Christ, the firstfruits**. Although there had been others who had been raised prior to Jesus' resurrection, He was the first to be raised never to die again. Second is the group of believers that will be raised afterward at His coming. Again, note that not every human being will be raised; only **those who belong to Christ**.

Paul was not interested in developing a complete scenario for events related to Jesus' return, the last judgment, and so on. His mind went immediately from the second coming to **the end**. The culmination of all things is for Christ the Lord to acknowledge that all His authority belongs to God the Father. The Father has entrusted to the Son the responsibility to abolish **all rule and all authority and power** that would oppose Him (Phil. 2:9-11). When that is accomplished, He will hand over the kingdom of God. There will then be no more opposition.

## VERSES 25-28

Paul offered a tantalizing glimpse of the rule of Christ after the resurrection of believers that focuses on His subduing all opposing forces. As we observed in John 20:9, Jesus “must rise,” that is, His resurrection was God’s determined will. Paul used the same verb form that John had used, **he must reign**. It is the heavenly Father’s plan, which cannot be thwarted, that God will put **all his enemies under his feet**. The image, based on Psalm 110:1, of a general-king forcing his enemies to grovel before him, implies complete conquest.

Yet Christ has already begun to rule over His enemies. Paul wrote in Ephesians 1:20-21 that Jesus began to exercise His rule at the resurrection. Death began to be defeated when it lost its grip on Jesus. When Christ returns and His people are raised, death will be abolished. If death became the first enemy of humanity, brought about by human sin, then death at the end will be **the last enemy to be abolished** (1 Cor. 15:54-55; Heb. 2:14-15; Rev. 20:13-14; 21:4).

Paul returned to the language of Psalm 110:1. It’s not just that this Psalm pictures a victorious king; it’s that the King in mind is the Messiah, the One to whom **God has put everything under his feet**. The victory of Christ has already begun to be expressed, even though His rule has not yet been fully manifested. Paul clarified the obvious that the heavenly Father has not placed Himself in subjection to the resurrected, messianic King. All things, the Father excepted, have been placed under the Son.

## No more will there ever be an enemy—death or the devil—rising to challenge God.

When the glorious splendor of Christ’s rule has been fully manifested, when at last death has been destroyed, **when everything is subject to Christ**, then Jesus will demonstrate that He is subject to the heavenly Father. Paul was not in any way implying that the Son is inferior to the Father. The Persons of the Trinity are equal in essence and glory. The subordination Paul spoke about was one of role or function. The ultimate end—goal, consummation—of all things is that the triune God **may be all in all**. This does not mean that God will be everything and that everything will be God (as taught in some religions). Rather, God’s excellence and superior authority over all things will be eternally exercised. No more will there ever be an enemy—death or the devil—rising to challenge God.

### How should being sure of the coming resurrection affect our daily lives?

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## 1 CORINTHIANS 15:25-28

<sup>25</sup> For he must reign until he puts all his enemies under his feet.

<sup>26</sup> The last enemy to be abolished is death.

<sup>27</sup> 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. <sup>28</sup> 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.

# LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

## FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

**WELCOME:** In advance, write the following on a whiteboard or large sheet of paper: “Stormy Forecast,” “Bombing,” “Flat Tire,” and “Identity Theft.” As group members arrive, direct attention to the list and lead individuals to reflect on how they feel when reading the posted words. Begin the session by inviting volunteers to name emotions that accompany the phrases. Write responses on a whiteboard or paper. Comment that like today, life was not guaranteed as safe and secure for first-century Christians. Summarize the second paragraph under First Thoughts from your personal study (p. 54).

**DISCUSS:** *Do you feel safer or less safe than you did ten years ago? Explain. How is a person's sense of security related to what one is willing to trust for that security?* (PSG, p. 46)

**TRANSITION:** *Paul was well aware that life is unfair and little, if anything, in this life has been guaranteed. That's why he placed all his confidence in the resurrection of Jesus. Explain that Paul wanted the new believers in Corinth to understand the crucial connection between Jesus' resurrection and the coming resurrection of all those united with the Lord Jesus.*

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

**EXPLAIN:** Provide context by explaining that Mary Magdalene, having seen the empty tomb, informed Peter and John that Jesus' body was missing.

**READ:** As a volunteer reads aloud John 20:3-9, encourage the group to consider the emotions evoked by this passage. Invite volunteers to share responses.

**GUIDE:** Focus on the significance of the linen cloths in verses 5-7. Use the comments under Verses 5-7 (PSG, p. 49) to provide more information. Ask: *How do the details included by John give credence to his account of Jesus' resurrection? Which detail carries the greatest weight or significance for you?* (PSG, p. 49)

**STUDY:** Lead the group to search for the action words (verbs) in the passage. Invite the group to name the actions in the order John recorded them.

**DISCUSS:** *What is the connection between seeing and believing? How can a person believe in Jesus without fully understanding?* (PSG, p. 50)

**TRANSITION:** Call attention to **Pack Item 10** (*Handout: Resurrection Appearances in Scripture*), and say: *The resurrection of Jesus grounds our faith, undergirds our mission, and establishes our hope in the life to come. In nearly all of his letters found in the New Testament, Paul had something to say about the resurrection of Jesus and its impact upon our lives.*

**READ:** Direct the group to read silently 1 Corinthians 15:20-22, looking for the references to Jesus' death and resurrection.

**CLARIFY:** Call attention to the word “firstfruits” (v. 20). Ask the group to locate additional information about firstfruits under Verse 20 (PSG, pp. 50–51).

**GUIDE:** Lead the group to locate the bad news (Adam's sin/death) and good news (Christ's resurrection/eternal life) in this passage.

**EMPHASIZE:** *Paul proclaimed that since death entered the world through one man (Adam), eternal life could be granted through one man as well (the resurrected Christ). Believers find true life through faith in Jesus Christ.*

**DISCUSS:** *What do these verses reveal about the results of Jesus' resurrection? How do the results identified by Paul give hope? Hope for what? (PSG, p. 51)*

**READ:** Direct the group to listen for a sequence of activities as you read aloud 1 Corinthians 15:23-28. Note that Paul explained, in due time, believers would experience resurrection and the eternal reign of Christ. Every generation of Christians has prayed and longed for the return of Christ in its time.

**DISCOVER:** Create three teams (an individual can be a team). Assign to each team one of the following Scriptures: 1 Corinthians 15:24; 1 Corinthians 15:25-27; and 1 Corinthians 15:28. Direct each team to use information under Verses 24-28 (PSG, pp. 52-53) to locate profound activities that occur as a result of Christ's victorious resurrection and triumphant return. After allowing each team to work, call for a volunteer from each team to share.

**DISCUSS:** *How does the promised return of Christ give strength when facing challenges in this life? How can you demonstrate the hope you have in Christ? (PSG, p. 53)*

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## SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

**REVIEW:** Call attention to the summary statement under the session title on page 46 of the PSG: *Believers find assurance for this life and the life to come through the resurrected Lord.* Call for volunteers to suggest ways this truth is demonstrated in today's Scripture passages.

**TESTIFY:** Encourage the group to consider their responses to the questions under In My Context (PSG, p. 54). Focus on second question set: *Reflect on the time when you first placed your trust in Jesus. (If you have not done so, review the information on the inside front cover to find out more about how you can do this.) With whom can you share about your salvation this week?* Invite volunteers to briefly share their experience with the group.

**GUIDE:** Display **Pack Item 6** (Poster: *Plan of Salvation*). Use the poster as a guide for reviewing the key elements of praying to receive Christ as Lord and Savior. You may also direct attention to the information on the inside front cover for those who are not yet Christians and want to know more.

**MEMORIZE:** Call attention to 1 Corinthians 15:20, the memory verse for this session. Challenge everyone to memorize the verse as a way of remembering the assurance of Christ's resurrection.

**PRAY:** Lead the group in a sentence prayer, inviting volunteers to pray a sentence praising God for the assurance of the resurrection. Close the prayer by thanking God for His assurance and praying for the group as they share the good news of Christ with others in the coming week.



## PRACTICE

- What does Easter mean to you? Reflect on your most memorable celebration of this holy day. How do you personally stay focused on Christ's resurrection?
- Pray for anyone in your group who has not yet accepted Christ and for the group as individuals share their faith.
- Follow up on guests, and invite them to be present for the next session.

## MORE IDEAS

### FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

As the group arrives, read aloud each of the following and ask how we can be assured it is true. Suggested responses are in parentheses following the word or phrase. Birth (birth certificate), ownership of vehicle (title), completion of an educational program or degree (diploma or certificate), residency (utility bill or tax receipt), membership in an organization (membership card). Then read aloud Jesus' resurrection and await responses. After group has suggested responses, direct attention to the session title (Assurance of the Resurrection). Explain that today's study focuses on how believers find assurance for this life and the life to come through the resurrected Lord.

### EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To illustrate John 20:3-9, enlist a volunteer to dramatically read aloud John 20:3-9 as two additional volunteers role-play Peter and John. Encourage the volunteers to communicate the emotion of the experience.
- To supplement the discussion of 1 Corinthians 15:20-22, pre-enlist a volunteer to complete the Bible Skill (PSG, p. 50) and share information about firstfruits with the group.
- To enhance the study of 1 Corinthians 15:23-28, encourage the group to list some benefits of the resurrection in a believer's life. Allow time for a pre-enlisted volunteer to explain how Jesus' resurrection has changed his or her life.

### SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Lead in a discussion of the first question set to conclude the session (PSG, p. 54): *As a group, discuss how the church can bear witness to the resurrection of Jesus throughout the year, beyond the emphasis of Easter. How can your group lead the way?* Select at least one idea for implementation; form a team of volunteers to make plans.

### SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

Celebrate the assurance of Christ's resurrection by leading the group in singing "Christ the Lord Is Risen Today," by Charles Wesley, or playing a recording of the song.

# REMEMBERING THE SACRIFICE

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

## 1 CORINTHIANS 11:17-29

**MEMORY VERSE: 1 CORINTHIANS 11:26**

- **READ** 1 Corinthians 11:2-34, First Thoughts (p. 64), and Understand the Context (pp. 64–65). Pay close attention to specific details Paul used when rebuking and offering correction to the Corinthians.
- **STUDY** 1 Corinthians 11:17-29, using Explore the Text (pp. 65–69). Notice how Paul did not simply rebuke the Corinthians' actions without offering truth to help them recover a right focus on the Lord's Supper. For further insight, consult the *Explore The Bible Adult Commentary* (available in print and digital format from LifeWay.com).
- **PLAN** the group time using the ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 70–71). Tailor the plans for your group using More Ideas (p. 72) ideas online at [Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible/Adults/LeaderExtras](http://Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible/Adults/LeaderExtras). Consider how to emphasize this session's memory verse (1 Cor. 11:26).
- **GROW** with other group leaders at the Groups Ministry blog ([LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry](http://LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry)).
- **GATHER** the following items:  Personal Study Guides; and  Pens or pencils for each person. Make copies of:  **PACK ITEM 9** (*Handout: References to the Lord's Supper*);  **PACK ITEM 10** (*Handout: Resurrection Appearances in Scripture*); and  **PACK ITEM 12** (*Handout: Problems in Corinth*). Prepare to display the following Pack Item:  **PACK ITEM 4** (*Poster: Problems in Corinth*). For More Ideas (p. 72):  A piece of string.



## KEY DOCTRINE

### *Lord's Supper*

The Lord's Supper is a symbolic act of obedience whereby members of the church, through partaking of the bread and the fruit of the vine, memorialize the death of the Redeemer and anticipate His second coming.

## BIBLE SKILL

*Read, reflect on, and react emotionally to a Bible text.*

Read 1 Corinthians 11:26-27 aloud several times. Each time, emphasize different words. For example, in one reading emphasize "bread" and "cup" each time they appear. Then read the text again, emphasizing all the action words. Take note of your thoughts. How do these verses move you emotionally? What feelings were evoked by the different words and phrases as you emphasized them?

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## FIRST THOUGHTS

Memorials are often created following major events, such as the USS *Arizona* Memorial in Pearl Harbor. These are solemn places that cause us to reflect on life and our purposes on this earth. There are also happier kinds of memorials, such as the birthplace of a president or a war hero's statue in a city park. Perhaps you have a personal memory that you've memorialized so that you and others won't forget.

(In PSG, p. 55) **What memorial places are special to you? What makes that place special or significant?**

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The Bible notes several examples of memorial places or events. The Israelites gathered twelve stones from the Jordan River to set up a permanent marker of their miraculous crossing into the promised land. The annual Passover meal was a way to remember the Lord's spectacular deliverance of His people from Egypt. Jesus took the occasion of eating the Passover with His disciples to establish a new memorial, the Lord's Supper. In this week's lesson, we'll look at what Paul taught the believers in Corinth concerning the right way—and the wrong way—to remember Jesus' death through the Lord's Supper.

## UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

### 1 CORINTHIANS 11:2-34

We have observed that Paul began his letter by looking at two problems in the church: divisions and immorality. Then he went on to answer some questions sent by the Corinthians. They had asked him about issues such as marriage and food offered to idols, which he answered in some detail.

As we consider 1 Corinthians 11, Paul's concern was to answer questions about public worship. Two matters needed clarification. First was the matter of head coverings in worship (vv. 2-16). Paul was well aware of the cultural expectations of his day, in which men and women dressed very differently from each other. His main point was that each gender should dress appropriately. Believers were to dress (and care for their hair) in ways demonstrating that both genders respected each other. They were to take care that the Lord was honored in the way they dressed when they gathered for worship.

Second was the matter of the Lord's Supper, the focus for this week's study (vv. 17-34). As we will see, Paul criticized the believers for allowing their divisions to be on display in the way they were behaving when they celebrated the Lord's Supper. He reminded them that the essential information about the Lord's Supper had been "received" from the Lord Himself. Then Paul

challenged them to examine themselves in preparation for sharing together in this act of Christian worship. Paul's teaching in these verses is the only passage in the epistles to provide specific directions regarding the right way for believers to remember Jesus' sacrifice through the Supper. Otherwise, we are dependent on the accounts in Matthew, Mark, and Luke that describe the historical origin of this ordinance as Jesus instituted it.

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

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

#### VERSES 17-18

Paul moved on from his previous topic of head coverings by using the transitional phrase, ***in giving this instruction***. The verb he used is strong, so the phrase could well be translated "commanding you this." The apostle struck a serious tone, letting the believers know up front that he wrote not to praise them but rather the opposite: to rebuke.

Not until verse 20 did Paul specifically reference the Lord's Supper. Here he let them know that what should have been an act of glorifying the Lord had become a disruption. Their gathering was leaving them worse off, not better off. By using the verb, ***I hear***, the apostle was moving from matters about which the Corinthians had written to him back to what he had learned in an oral report (1:11; 5:1; 7:1). What troubled him was that their manner of coming together reflected deep ***divisions among*** them. These divisions were different than the cliques Paul had condemned earlier, based on which human leader people were following. The divisions he had in mind now were economically based: well-to-do versus poor.

#### VERSE 19

Paul's comment here—almost an aside—provides a theological framework for what was happening in the congregation: ***it is necessary that there be factions among you***. He meant that God, in His providence, allows controversy in a church. Why? So that members can come to recognize which teachings (and teachers) are shoddy and which ones are ***approved*** (the term suggests the idea of passing a test). God can use congregational troubles as a test, and eventually those who are in the right will be recognized.

#### VERSE 20

Paul returned to the specific topic at hand: ***the Lord's Supper***. This verse stands out as the only place in the entire New Testament that uses this name for the great Christian ordinance. We might assume the term is used frequently in the Bible, but not so. Several things may be noted:

- The adjective translated *Lord's* stresses a close connection to the Lord Jesus.
- The main idea may be "the supper belonging to (or hosted by) the Lord."
- The main idea may be "the supper ordained by the Lord."

### BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read "The Lord's Supper and the Love Feast" in the Spring 2018 issue of Biblical Illustrator. Available at [LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator](http://LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator).

#### 1 CORINTHIANS 11:17-20

<sup>17</sup> Now in giving this instruction I do not praise you, since you come together not for the better but for the worse. <sup>18</sup> 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.

<sup>19</sup> Indeed, it is necessary that there be factions among you, so that those who are approved may be recognized among you. <sup>20</sup> When you come together, then, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper.

- The main idea may be “the supper at which the Lord’s ‘body’ and ‘blood’ are shared.”

Paul’s point was that when the Corinthians came together, what they were doing was so disgraceful that it had taken on sordid character. The Lord no longer had anything to do with it, even if the Corinthians thought they were honoring Him.

## 1 CORINTHIANS 11:21

<sup>21</sup> For at the meal, each one eats his own supper. So one person is hungry while another gets drunk!

### VERSE 21

We are accustomed to participating in the Supper as a token meal, with a pinch of bread and a small sip of juice. The Corinthians were evidently partaking in the Supper at the end of an early version of the church potluck (see the reference to love feasts in 2 Pet. 2:13; Jude 12). It had evolved into a strange supper in which each person or family was bringing their own food and eating only what they had brought. They weren’t sharing. The occasion had become for each person merely **his own supper**. There was no true Christian fellowship and therefore it was not really the Lord’s Supper.

Apparently the wealthy brought in a veritable banquet, including plenty of wine, and they proceeded to chow down and drink too much. The poor, likely including slaves, couldn’t afford to bring any food, and they went **hungry**. The wealthy were eating ahead of others. In no way could what was happening be called a shared meal.

## 1 CORINTHIANS 11:22

<sup>22</sup> 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!

### VERSE 22

Paul asked a string of questions, essentially to get the Corinthians to realize the evil they were doing, before he offered a corrective. His first question requires an obvious yes: homes are the normal place to eat and drink in. The implication was “if that’s what you’re doing at the Lord’s Supper, then stay home.” The church is no place to discriminate between economic classes (see Jas. 2:1-26).

The second question was meant to shame the wealthy by showing that what they were doing was (1) despising what the church of God is—the family of God’s people and (2) embarrassing those who have nothing—the poor. God has called people from all economic classes to be His people, and those who mistreat the poor deserve God’s judgment.

Paul next asked whether the Corinthians thought he should **praise** them for such behavior. Here, he answered the question directly: **I do not praise you in this matter!** With this response he explained what he had asserted at the beginning of the paragraph, “I do not praise you” (11:17).

(In PSG, p. 58) **What are some ways a religious observance can become misguided? What factors contribute to the observance becoming misguided? What can be done to keep the focus of a religious practice on God and His purposes?**

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

### VERSES 23-24

Almost all Bible students believe this is the earliest written account of the institution of the Lord's Supper, preceding the composition of the Gospel accounts by at least several years. Further, this is one of the few incidents in Jesus' life that Paul described in detail.

In their debasing of the Supper, the Corinthians had forgotten what Paul had earlier taught them. When the apostle wrote that he had **passed on** what he **received from the Lord**, it is uncertain whether he meant that the Lord had given him this information by direct revelation. He may well have learned this teaching indirectly through other apostles such as Peter (Gal. 1:18). In either case he was confident of the facts. Paul briefly set the context for the first Lord's Supper as occurring **on the night when he was betrayed**. There is irony and poignancy that the ritual which recalls Jesus' sacrificial love was established at the same time that human hate was about to betray Him to His enemies.

The sequence of verbs is beautifully expressed: **took**, gave **thanks**, **broke**, and **said**. (Compare with Matt. 26:26: took, blessed, broke, gave, and said.) The thanksgiving or blessing was the usual way for Jews to begin a meal, but this blessing actually occurred during supper. The breaking of the bread (probably a whole loaf) occurred essentially so that it could be distributed, rather than to emphasize the brokenness of His body in the crucifixion (see John 19:36). Each phrase of Jesus' own words is weighty.

- **This is my body.** Although Christian thinkers through the centuries have argued about the precise meaning of these words, it's best to understand Jesus as saying, "This bread means My body" or "This bread represents My body." His actual, physical body was at that moment still present with the disciples in the room of the last supper.
- **Which is for you.** There was a purpose for His suffering and death. He died on behalf of others. His suffering atoned for the sins of those who place their trust in Him.
- **Do this in remembrance of me.** Our Lord ordained that His followers are to remember His death by eating the bread and drinking the cup. Jesus instituted this observance at a Passover meal, which commemorated the Israelites' exodus (Ex. 12:14-27).

### VERSE 25

Next Paul turned his attention to **the cup**. He provided an abbreviated sequence of verbs, mentioning only **took ... and said**. The words establish a parallel between the bread and the cup. (See Matt. 26:27 for the sequence took, gave thanks, gave, and said.) Again, each phrase is significant.

- **This cup is the new covenant.** Long ago, the prophet Jeremiah had looked forward to the time when God would establish a new, better covenant with His people (Jer. 31:31-34). The old covenant was the Mosaic covenant. Jesus declared that the new covenant had arrived in His person and death.

### 1 CORINTHIANS 11:23-24

<sup>23</sup> 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, <sup>24</sup> and when he had given thanks, broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

### 1 CORINTHIANS 11:25

<sup>25</sup> 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."

- ***In My blood.*** The reference, of course, is to our Lord's upcoming death. Throughout the New Testament, "blood" is used to refer to Jesus' sacrificial death. The contents of the cup represented His blood, just as the bread represented His body. His actual, literal blood was still coursing through His body even as He established the ordinance.
- ***Do this ... in remembrance of me.*** These words are identical to His command about the bread.
- ***As often as you drink it.*** Jesus did not specify any frequency for the Lord's Supper. *As often as* means "whenever." The Passover was remembered by Jews once a year. In the Book of Acts, there is evidence for a weekly Lord's Supper by Christians, if the references to breaking bread mean the Lord's Supper (2:42,46; 20:7,11).

## The Lord's Supper is a visible gospel presentation.

### 1 CORINTHIANS 11:26

<sup>26</sup> For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

#### VERSE 26

Not only do we look back to Jesus' death in the Lord's Supper, we look forward to His return (***until he comes***). Whenever we eat this bread and drink the cup, the death of Jesus is declared. The verb translated ***proclaim*** occurs in several New Testament verses to describe the witness of believers to unbelievers (see 1 Cor. 9:14; Phil. 1:17; Col. 1:28). When we partake of the Lord's Supper in worship and in remembrance, we are announcing to those outside the fellowship of the church that the only way of salvation is by the Lord's death. The Lord's Supper is a visible gospel presentation.

**In what sense is the Lord's Supper a visible gospel presentation? What are some practical ways we can prepare ourselves to take the Lord's Supper?**

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### 1 CORINTHIANS 11:27

<sup>27</sup> 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.

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

##### VERSE 27

Paul drew a practical conclusion about the way the Lord's Supper is to be taken. Note that no person is actually worthy of partaking of the Supper. None of us deserves the goodness of the Lord. Yet in another sense, we come worthily when we come as Christ has invited us to come: in faith, in remembrance of His death, and with respect for what the Lord's Supper stands for.

In the original situation in Corinth, eating and drinking ***in an unworthy manner*** had been a matter of dishonoring the poor of the church, indicated by the gluttony and drunkenness of some wealthy members when they gathered as a church. There are surely other ways in which the

Lord's Supper can be observed in an unworthy manner. Anytime we focus only on ourselves rather than on others when we gather to remember the death of Jesus, we are doing so in a way that the Lord detests.

This is a very serious offense, which Paul described as ***sin against the body and blood of the Lord***. He meant that they were behaving in a way contrary to the purpose for which Christ gave up His body and blood: to provide salvation for all who believe, whatever their economic status. When rich Christians discriminated against poor Christians at the Lord's Supper, they were sinning against those for whom Jesus died. They were sinning against Christ Himself.

#### VERSE 28

To avoid a serious offense at the Lord's Supper, all believers should regularly ***examine*** themselves. We are to consider our motives as we approach our observance. Such self-examination should occur before participating in eating the bread and drinking the cup. Paul did not mean that the Supper is mainly a matter of introspection, with believers mainly focusing on their own lives. He had already made it clear that the Lord's Supper is a celebration of Christ's redemptive work, the unity of the church, and the proclamation of the gospel. It is only as we intentionally prepare that we are to focus our attention.

### The Lord's Supper is not to be entered into flippantly.

#### VERSE 29

Bible students have understood the phrase ***without recognizing the body*** in one of two ways. Some think Paul meant, "not understanding that the bread of the Supper represents Christ's body given sacrificially for us." Others, noting that Paul did not mention the cup, think that he was referring to the church as Christ's body (12:12-27). On this view, Paul meant, "not understanding that believers, when they gather, are a single body—the body of Christ." In either case, this dishonors Christ. ***Eats and drinks judgment on himself*** stands as a sober warning that the Lord will discipline those who disrespect His Supper. The Lord's Supper is not to be entered into flippantly.

**What are some errors we might make regarding the taking of the Lord's Supper?**

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#### 1 CORINTHIANS 11:28

<sup>28</sup> Let a person examine himself; in this way let him eat the bread and drink from the cup.

#### 1 CORINTHIANS 11:29

<sup>29</sup> For whoever eats and drinks without recognizing the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself.

# LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

## FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

**GET STARTED:** Prior to the group's arrival, list on a whiteboard or sheet of paper several memorials or monuments in your area. These may include statues or buildings named for events or people. As the group arrives, point to the list of memorials and ask volunteers to name other memorials they have visited. Add those to the list.

**DISCUSS:** After most have arrived, explain that on-site memorials often are created following a major event, such as a battle, war, or birth of a famous person. Use the information from your study of First Thoughts (p. 64) to share additional examples of United States and biblical memorials. Ask: *What memorial places are special to you? What makes that place special or significant?* (PSG, p. 55)

**TRANSITION:** *Jesus took the occasion of eating the Passover with His disciples to establish a new memorial, the Lord's Supper. In this week's study, we'll look at what Paul taught the believers in Corinth about the right way—and the wrong way—to remember Jesus' death through the Lord's Supper.*

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

**GUIDE:** Point out **Pack Item 4** (*Poster: Problems in Corinth*) and comment that Paul continued to give practical instruction concerning church matters in 1 Corinthians 11-14, especially in relation to aspects of corporate worship. Direct attention to the "Propriety in Church Worship" on **Pack Item 12** (*Handout: Problems in Corinth*). Call on someone to read the section "The Lord's Supper" as a summary introduction for this session's study.

**READ:** Invite a volunteer to read aloud 1 Corinthians 11:17-22, as the rest of the group listens for how Paul described divisions within the church.

**DISCUSS:** *What was the major problem Paul addressed in these verses?*

**EXPLAIN:** *The intention of the church, of course, was to observe the Lord's Supper as they met together—and Paul had every expectation they would follow his instructions. But instead, at the meal, each one ate ... without regard to other believers. Unlike the observance of many churches today, where the Lord's Supper is part of a corporate worship service, the Corinthian believers included the Lord's Supper as part of a meal they would eat together.* (PSG, p. 58)

**READ:** Invite a volunteer to read Matthew 26:26 and Mark 14:22, where Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper "as they were eating." Call attention to **Pack Item 9** (*Handout: References to the Lord's Supper*). Direct the group to scan the information on the handout to enhance understanding of the Lord's Supper.

**DISCUSS:** *What are some ways a religious observance can become misguided? What factors contribute to the observance becoming misguided? What can be done to keep the focus of a religious practice on God and His purposes?* (PSG, p. 58)

**TRANSITION:** *Paul did not simply rebuke the Corinthians' actions without offering truth to help them recover a right focus on the Lord's Supper.*

**READ:** Read aloud 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, calling for the group to listen for the way Paul re-focused the Corinthians on the meaning of the Lord's Supper.

**DISCUSS:** *How did Paul's use of the plural "you" in these verses confront the selfish individualism of the Corinthians that Paul was addressing?* (PSG, p. 60)

**DEFINE:** Lead the group to locate the elements of the Lord's Supper in this passage (bread and cup). Review the comments under Verses 23-24 in the PSG (pp. 59-60) to help the group better understand the significance of the bread and the cup.

**EXPLAIN:** Use information in the last paragraph under Verses 25-26 (PSG, p. 60) to explain that when believers observe the Lord's Supper, they are remembering and proclaiming the Lord's death until He returns. Point out that 1 Corinthians 11:26 is the memory verse for this week.

**DISCUSS:** *How can the Lord's Supper be a means of sharing the gospel with others? How does observing the Lord's Supper give a believer confidence in his or her salvation?* (PSG, p. 60)

**STUDY:** Lead the group to complete the Bible Skill in the PSG (p. 61). Invite volunteers to share responses to the questions.

**TRANSITION:** *After recalling Jesus' Last Supper, Paul returned to instructions for the Corinthians.*

**READ:** Direct someone to read 1 Corinthians 11:27-29, as the remainder of the group notes how Paul guided the Corinthian believers to examine their motives for observing the Lord's Supper.

**CLARIFY:** Use information in the first paragraph under Verses 27-29 (PSG, p. 61) to help explain what Paul meant by being unworthy to take the Lord's Supper. Stress that believers are to be invited to humbly participate in the observance of the Lord's Supper.

**DISCUSS:** *How might a person approach the Lord's Supper in "an unworthy manner"? What might one do to properly prepare to observe the Lord's Supper?* (PSG, p. 62)

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## **SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)**

**REVIEW:** Lead in a review of the bulleted statements under In My Context (PSG, p. 63). Invite individuals to pick the statement that best describes the biggest insight gained during the session.

**CHALLENGE:** Lead the group to answer the second question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 63): *As a group, list different ways that the Lord's Supper can be taken in a worship setting. Discuss as a group ways group members can encourage one another to participate in the Lord's Supper in a proper way.*

**PRAY:** Close in prayer, asking God to guide the group in observing the Lord's Supper with worship, remembrance, and examination.



## PRACTICE

- Reflect on the last time you observed the Lord's Supper. Ask God to help you apply truths from this study to future Lord's Supper observances.
- Mark on your calendar the next date of the Lord's Supper observance at your church (obtain date from your church office). Make a note to contact the group prior to the observance, reminding them of this session and your discussion.
- Pray for your church. Perhaps, like the Corinthian believers, you have strayed from Christ's intent and have unhelpful or destructive aspects of your church life. Ask God to lead and guide in moving your congregation back on track.

## MORE IDEAS

### FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

To replace the Focus Attention idea, display a piece of string wrapped around your finger. Comment that string is an age-old custom to help remember something. Lead participants to name other ways of remembering (examples: taking photos, making videos, writing in a journal). Direct attention to the session title (PSG, p. 55).

### EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To supplement the discussion of 1 Corinthians 11:17-22, invite the group to imagine that Paul was writing a letter to your church about your observance of the Lord's Supper. Discuss what Paul might say to your congregation.
- To enhance the discussion of 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, lead in a time of reflection on how believers should prepare for observing the Lord's Supper. Call on a volunteer to read **Pack Item 10** (*Handout: Resurrection Appearances in Scripture*). Then ask: *What role does remembering the hope of Jesus' resurrection have in our preparation? How can contemplating the experiences of those who saw the risen Jesus draw us to a more personal observation of the Lord's Supper? How can believers keep remembrance of Christ's sacrifice fresh for each observance?*
- To supplement the study of 1 Corinthians 11:27-29, before the session, collect future calendar dates from the church office for observing the Lord's Supper. Share these dates with your group and suggest that they write them somewhere prominent as a reminder of self-examination before observing the Lord's Supper.

### SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Direct attention to the Key Doctrine on page 59 of the PSG. Guide the group to determine how the doctrinal statement relates to 1 Corinthians 11:17-22. Call for ways their understanding of the Lord's Supper has been enhanced by this study.

### SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

Invite group to name hymns and praise songs they associate with observance of the Lord's Supper. Select one of these to sing as a group or play a recording of "In Remembrance of Me," by Robert Kochis.

# SERVING GOD'S PEOPLE

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

## 1 CORINTHIANS 12:4-12,21-26

**MEMORY VERSE: 1 CORINTHIANS 12:26**

- **READ** 1 Corinthians 12:1-31, First Thoughts (p. 74), and Understand the Context (p. 74). As you read, pay close attention to the various ways Paul communicated the diversity of spiritual gifts. At the same time, notice how he emphasized that the various gifts are for one purpose: to serve God.
- **STUDY** 1 Corinthians 12:4-12,21-26, using Explore the Text (pp. 75–79). As you study, focus on the specific gifts listed. Be aware that additional gifts are identified in Romans 12:6-8; 1 Corinthians 12:28-30; Ephesians 4:11; and 1 Peter 4:9-11.
- **PLAN** the group time using the ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 80–81). Tailor the plans for your group using More Ideas (p. 82) and ideas included online at [Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible/Adults/LeaderExtras](http://Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible/Adults/LeaderExtras). Consider creative ways to use the Suggested Music Idea (p. 82).
- **GROW** from expert insights on weekly studies through the Ministry Grid ([MinistryGrid.com/Web/ExploretheBible](http://MinistryGrid.com/Web/ExploretheBible)).
- **GATHER** the following items:  Personal Study Guides;  The lyrics to the hymn “Holy, Holy, Holy,” by Reginald Heber;  Athletic or musical items for Focus Attention; and  Paper and pens for each person. Make copies of:  **PACK ITEM 8** (*Handout: Paul’s Lists of Spiritual Gifts*). Prepare to display the following Pack Item:  **PACK ITEM 3** (*Key Verse: 2 Corinthians 5:20*). For More Ideas (p. 82):  A large serving container, bowls, and napkins.



## KEY DOCTRINE

### *Holy Spirit*

The Holy Spirit cultivates Christian character, comforts believers, and bestows the spiritual gifts by which they serve God through His church.

## FIRST THOUGHTS

Think about someone who is athletically gifted. Now consider a gifted musician. How did those individuals get that way? If we focus on the hours of practice they endure, we might be led to think practice is what sets them apart. If we focus on the natural abilities required, we might be led to excuse ourselves from even trying to reach those same achievements.

(In PSG, p. 64) **What factors would you point to when thinking about people who are high achievers in their field? What factor do you think plays the biggest role? Explain.**

God gives spiritual gifts to His people, and these gifts are parallel to natural talents in many ways. Spiritual gifts, however, are received by individuals not when they are born biologically; rather, they are received by us as believers when we are born again. Further, just as natural talents must be recognized and developed, so it is with our spiritual gifts.

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul reminded the Corinthian Christians that each of them had received a special gift—or gifts—from God. These gifts were meant for service to Him and to His people. The principles Paul taught have ongoing significance for believers today.

## BIBLE SKILL

*Identify the imagery in a passage and discover what it communicates.*

Observe the words and phrases in 1 Corinthians 12:12-26 that describe a human body and its various parts. What does each word communicate to you about the nature of the church as the body of Christ and the role of individual believers? How is the imagery of the body like (or unlike) a local Christian congregation?

## UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

### 1 CORINTHIANS 12:1-31

Last week's lesson on the Lord's Supper was part of Paul's response to written questions the Corinthians had sent. Recall his words, "the matters you wrote about" in 1 Corinthians 7:1 and "now about" in 7:25 and 8:1. Chapter 12 begins with "now concerning spiritual gifts."

The apostle's teaching in 1 Corinthians 12–14 continue the general theme of public worship, which he began in chapter 11. A quick scan of these three chapters shows that Paul's central concern was the proper exercise of spiritual gifts. Chapter 12 focuses on the diversity of spiritual gifts; chapter 13 emphasizes love in the use of spiritual gifts (next week's lesson); and chapter 14 highlights the specific gifts of tongues and prophecy.

In 12:1-11, Paul made the case for the diversity of gifts. He listed nine different spiritual gifts. Then, in verses 12-31, Paul made the case for the unity of gifts in the local congregation and compared it to the various organs and members of a human body. Paul's major concern throughout this teaching was for the Corinthian believers to recognize that they had been gifted to fulfill a God-initiated ministry in the congregation and that they were expected to use their God-given gifts for kingdom work.

# EXPLORE THE TEXT

DIVERSE (1 COR. 12:4-6)

## VERSES 4-6

Just as there is a variety of talents, so there is a variety of gifts. The term translated **gifts** in the original language (*charisma*) is closely related to the New Testament word usually translated “grace” (*charis*). In other words, a spiritual gift comes as a result of God’s grace. Further, whatever assortment of spiritual gifts there is, all gifts come from **the same Spirit**. The Holy Spirit determines which gift will be given to a particular believer.

Gifts are to be used in **different ministries**. *Ministries* carries the idea of helping or serving the congregation. A form of this term was used for serving food to widows (Acts 6:2-3). The term later came to be used for the office of deacon (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8), those who had been recognized as church helpers. Congregations have different needs at different times, and often they meet the needs of those outside their own community. It is the **Lord**, Jesus Himself, who calls His people to such acts of service, using the gifts that the Spirit has given for that very purpose.

Various ministries lead to multiple **activities**. This term is unusual in the New Testament, typically meaning “effects” or “results.” Although we carry out the work or activities related to congregational life, it is **God**, the heavenly Father, who activates the working of these gifts.

## Spiritual gifts are not limited to some elite class of leaders in the congregation.

Three additional points may be noted. First, **each person** is involved in these things. Spiritual gifts are not limited to some elite class of leaders in the congregation. Second, Paul referred explicitly to each Person of the Trinity: *Spirit ... Lord ... God*. Just as there is diversity yet unity in God’s own self, so there is diversity yet unity in the gifts He bestows. Third, there is a logical relationship between *gifts*, *ministries*, and *activities*. *Gifts* are the fuel for and lead to *ministries*, and *ministries* are the fuel for and lead to *activities*.

(In PSG, p. 66) **Why is it important for each believer to realize that God has uniquely gifted him or her? What are the dangers of wanting to be gifted in a different way?**

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## 1 CORINTHIANS 12:4-6

<sup>4</sup> Now there are different gifts, but the same Spirit. <sup>5</sup> There are different ministries, but the same Lord.

<sup>6</sup> And there are different activities, but the same God produces each gift in each person.

## BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read “Paul’s Spiritual Gifts Lists, A Comparison,” an archived *Biblical Illustrator* article provided on the CD-ROM in the Spring 2018 *Explore the Bible: Leader Pack*.

## 1 CORINTHIANS 12:7

<sup>7</sup> A manifestation of the Spirit is given to each person for the common good:

## 1 CORINTHIANS 12:8-10

<sup>8</sup> to one is given a message of wisdom through the Spirit, to another, a message of knowledge by the same Spirit, <sup>9</sup> to another, faith by the same Spirit, to another, gifts of healing by the one Spirit, <sup>10</sup> 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.

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

### VERSE 7

The Spirit Himself is the precious gift given to each believer. His indwelling presence is evidence that we have been truly born again (Rom. 8:9). Here, Paul spoke about the **manifestation of the Spirit**, what the Spirit is currently doing for us. The exercise of the gifts of the Spirit will produce what is beneficial, that is, it will be **for the common good**.

### VERSES 8-10

Paul's list of nine spiritual gifts in these verses should be thought of as representative rather than exhaustive. It may be compared to his list of seven gifts in Romans 12:6-8 (see also Eph. 4:11; 1 Pet. 4:9-11).

Paul did not define or describe in detail any of these nine gifts. Thus, we must draw on other passages of Scripture in order to make appropriate conclusions. Nevertheless, for some of these gifts Bible students have differing interpretations. What we all agree with is that every believer has received a gift or gifts according to God's will.

## Paul's list of nine spiritual gifts in these verses should be thought of as representative rather than exhaustive.

**Message of wisdom.** Paul had severely criticized the "wisdom of the world" earlier in this letter (1:18-31). True wisdom, he had said, is found in the message about the crucified Christ. Thus, the *message of wisdom* must refer to declaring how the gospel applies to a particular situation, such as making wise decisions or choosing a right course of action. Some Bible students believe Paul was thinking about wisdom given by supernatural revelation; others believe he was thinking about the wisdom that comes more "naturally" through reflection on Scripture, prayer, and experience.

**Message of knowledge.** This phrase, like the preceding phrase, occurs here only in the New Testament. Thus it is difficult to know exactly what Paul meant or what the difference is between the *message of wisdom* and the *message of knowledge*. This gift may be related to prophecy, in which the prophet spoke by divine revelation. Paul probably meant knowledge of God that comes from direct revelation or the ability to teach correctly.

**Faith.** This is to be distinguished from saving faith, which all Christians have. Here Paul had in mind a gift received by some but not all believers. He likely meant the kind of mustard-seed faith that Jesus talked about (Matt. 17:20). This faith reflects the strong conviction that God will act in a particular way in a specific situation. Paul alluded to this kind of faith in 1 Corinthians 13:2. Persons with such great faith inspire and lead others to act in ways that they would not have thought was possible.

**Gifts of healing.** Both terms in this phrase are plural in the original, so the translation could be "gifts of healings." The reference is to bodily healing, of which many miraculous examples are found in the Gospels and Acts. By using the plural, Paul was making the point that different people are gifted in different kinds of healing (perhaps including medical

specialists of various kinds). Further, “healings” suggests that there are different kinds of illnesses and that there are various ways in which God heals—whether through miracle or medicine.

**Performing of miracles.** Paul was referring to supernatural intervention in situations other than bodily healing. In the Gospels, Jesus performed astonishing miracles to point to His identity as Messiah (for example, the feeding of the five thousand and the stilling of the storm in John 6). The apostles continued this miracle ministry, as recorded in Acts (see 8:13; 14:8-10; 28:1-6). Bible students disagree whether throughout Christian history and today miracles have been ongoing.

**Prophecy.** Old Testament prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah spoke words God had revealed to them. Their ministries included both foretelling (predicting the future) as well as forth-telling (asking for a response, often repentance). In Acts, prophets had a similar ministry (see Acts 11:27-28; 13:1). This is the spiritual gift Paul was speaking about, a fulfillment of Joel 2:28-29 that prophecy would be widespread in the last days (see Acts 2:16-21). Paul later taught that prophecy builds up believers gathered for worship (1 Cor. 14:3).

**Distinguishing between spirits.** If there are true prophets of God, then there are also false prophets (which the Old Testament Israelites certainly experienced). Moses had provided instructions about discerning true prophets (see Deut. 18:20-22). In the New Testament churches, some believers were gifted with supernatural ability to distinguish between persons truly inspired by the Holy Spirit and those led astray by other spirits (see 1 John 4:1).

**Different kinds of tongues.** This gift has been controversial in our time, just as it was in Paul’s day, for he devoted much of 1 Corinthians 14 to a discussion of tongues. Did Paul have in mind known languages (as on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2:4-8)? Or was this gift a kind of ecstatic speech (“angelic tongues,” 1 Cor. 13:1)? Two points that Paul later made are important to note: not all Christians have this gift (12:30); and those with this gift are to control when and how they use it (14:27-28).

**Interpretation of tongues.** If persons gifted in languages did not understand what they were saying, then it was important for a translation to be provided. This would be true whether the speech was a known human language or ecstatic speech. Paul later taught that in public worship there must be no more than two or three people who spoke in such languages, each in turn, and that a translation or interpretation must be provided (14:27-28).

**Why do you think Paul mentioned the Holy Spirit so frequently in this passage (five times in vv. 7-9)? How should that emphasis impact the way we view spiritual gifts?**

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

### 1 CORINTHIANS 12:11-12

<sup>11</sup> One and the same Spirit is active in all these, distributing to each person as he wills.

<sup>12</sup> 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.

### 1 CORINTHIANS 12:21-23

<sup>21</sup> 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!”

<sup>22</sup> On the contrary, those parts of the body that are weaker are indispensable. <sup>23</sup> 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,

### VERSES 11-12

As Paul concluded his brief list of various manifestations of the Spirit, he made a general observation which contains three elements.

- All spiritual gifts come from one and the same Spirit. If the Spirit has given them, then they are all important, for He always acts with intent.
- Each person in the congregation has received a gift (or gifts). Therefore, each person has a ministry in the life of the church.
- It’s the Spirit who sovereignly distributes gifts as He wills. We do not get to pick our own spiritual gifts, any more than we picked our own natural talents. This means that no one should feel superior (or inferior) because he or she has (or does not have) any particular manifestation of the Spirit.

The apostle compared the church to a human body. He began by making two assertions that set up his analogy. First, the human **body is one**. There is a unity to the human body even though it has many parts. Second, just as the human body has many parts, **so also** it is with the church, the body of Christ. There is always unity and diversity in the congregation, just as there is in the human body.

**We do not get to pick our own spiritual gifts, any more than we picked our own natural talents.**

### VERSE 21

In verses 15-17, Paul noted the role of the foot, the hand, the ear, and the eye. In verse 21, he imagined a scene in which body parts questioned their need for other body parts. It’s inconceivable, for example, for an **eye** to tell a **hand** that it can function quite well without it. Eyes and hands do different things. In a healthy human body, they work together. Similarly, **the head can’t say to the feet** that they aren’t needed. We can imagine a modern cartoon animator at work drawing a head getting along without feet for the sake of a laugh. In real life, when body parts don’t cooperate, we’re aware of a horrible tragedy. So it is when members of the body of Christ aren’t working together, each with its own unique contribution. It’s a tragedy.

### VERSES 22-23

Paul extended the discussion by focusing on body parts that seem to be **weaker** and are often not thought about. He didn’t specify which human body parts he had in mind. Whatever the part, it is necessary, once human anatomy is understood. So it is in the congregation. Members who seem to be weak or unimportant are truly essential. No one in the church, therefore, has the right to look down on another member.

Paul also did not specify which human body parts were **less honorable** or **unrespectable**. But he spoke immediately of clothing such parts so that they have **greater honor** or better presentation. Perhaps he thought

about how we put rings on fingers and how we can take care to cover our torsos with nice clothing (the main function of which is for the sake of modesty). If someone puts on earrings (and whoever thought earlobes were important?), then surely it's not too much for the church to act similarly. We are to honor persons whom we naturally tend to overlook.

#### VERSES 24-26

Paul moved from unrespectable parts of the body (which are generally covered with clothes and are therefore not seen) to our **respectable parts**. These parts have no need of clothing. (Think of faces and arms, although again Paul did not specify.) God has put the human body together in such a way that we give greater honor through clothing and adornment to the parts of the body that are considered less honorable. The honorable remains unadorned; the less honorable gets the special attention of adornment. In the church, those who have obvious, public gifts need no special attention; those whose gifts and ministries are obscure are to be recognized and given special respect.

The apostle believed that this analogy strengthened his case for the unity of the church as the body of Christ. He added an additional reason: **no division in the body** is permissible. The various parts are to exhibit a mutual **concern for each other**. All parts are interdependent—many yet one; one yet many.

### Every Christian matters in the life of the church at large—and to other believers individually.

Do you know what it feels like to hit your thumb with a hammer? Although only your thumb was hurt, your whole body is shot through with pain. Or, to choose a different example, when you've enjoyed a shampoo, your whole body feels relaxed. So Paul extended the illustration. **If one member**—of the human body or of the church—**suffers, all the members suffer with it**. Similarly, **if one member is honored**, then the others share in the honor. Every Christian matters in the life of the church at large—and to other believers individually. Because we are all united to Christ, what happens to one affects the others, whether it involves joy or suffering.

#### How might we guard against overemphasizing some gifts over others?

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#### 1 CORINTHIANS 12:24-26

<sup>24</sup> which our respectable parts do not need. Instead, God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the less honorable, <sup>25</sup> so that there would be no division in the body, but that the members would have the same concern for each other. <sup>26</sup> So if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.

# LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

## FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

**DISPLAY:** As the group arrives, call attention to a display of athletic equipment (examples: athletic shoes, golf ball, baseball, team jersey). As an alternative option, select a music theme (examples: musical instrument, music book, CD). Invite volunteers to name gifted athletes (or musicians).

**ASK:** *What factors would you point to when thinking about people who are high achievers in their field? What factor do you think plays the biggest role? Explain.* (PSG, p. 64)

**TRANSITION:** *In this week's study of spiritual gifts, we will learn that God gifts His followers for service to Him and His people.*

**EXPLAIN:** Help the group recognize the difference between natural talents and spiritual gifts. Clarify that individuals receive natural talents when they are born biologically, while believers receive spiritual gifts when they are born again through Christ's salvation.

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

**READ:** As you read aloud 1 Corinthians 12:4-6, emphasize the words "different/differences" and "same" each time they are mentioned.

**EMPHASIZE:** Lead the group to underline all the occurrences of "different/differences" and "same" in this passage. Then invite volunteers to call out the word that follows each use. Note that while gifts, ministries, and activities are different, God remains the same.

**CLARIFY:** Call attention to the information under Verses 4-6 (PSG, p. 66) to explain the concepts of unity and diversity. Point out that the same Spirit gives gifts, but those gifts might manifest themselves through various ministries in the church and also through a broad range of activities that equip and edify God's people. Say: *In the body of Christ, not all have the same gifts or assignments, but they do share the same Spirit, the same Lord, and the same God.*

**GUIDE:** Lead group members to locate the three references to God in this passage ("Spirit," "Lord," and "God"). Explain that this represents the Trinity, or God's three-in-oneness. Direct a volunteer to recall or read the words to "Holy, Holy, Holy" by Reginald Heber, which is based on the reality of the Trinity.

**TRANSITION:** *All believers are gifted to fulfill a God-initiated role in the ministry of the church. The Holy Spirit initiates and determines what gifts will be given to what believers. In the next section of verses, Paul identified specific spiritual gifts.*

**READ:** Invite a volunteer to read aloud 1 Corinthians 12:7-10, as the rest of the group listens for specific gifts the Spirit gives to believers.

**DISCUSS:** *Identify ways in which a person might use a spiritual gift to benefit himself or herself rather than the church. How can believers guard against those tendencies?* (PSG, p. 67)

**REPORT:** Distribute copies of **Pack Item 8** (*Handout: Paul's Lists of Spiritual Gifts*). Form small teams, and provide paper and pens to each team. Assign each team specific gifts from the handout. Lead each team to use the Bible references listed on the handout and the information under Verses 8-10 (PSG, pp. 67–69) to provide insight into each assigned spiritual gift. Invite volunteers from each team to report information to the large group.

**SAY:** *Believers receive specific gifts that are given at the Holy Spirit's discretion.*

**DISCUSS:** *How does knowing that it is the Holy Spirit who gives the gifts create confidence in a believer to exercise his or her gift? How is receiving a spiritual gift part of a believer's stewardship? (PSG, p. 69)*

**TRANSITION:** *Each spiritual gift is important to the church and strategically intentional in its placement. Just as the human body must function as one unit, so too must the body of Christ.*

**READ:** Direct the group to notice the way Paul used the analogy of the human body to describe the unity and diversity of the body of Christ, while a volunteer reads aloud 1 Corinthians 12:11-12,21-26.

**MINI-LECTURE:** Present a mini-lecture about Paul's four key claims that weaker or more feeble parts of the body are essential. These key claims are discussed in the paragraphs under Verses 21-26 (PSG, pp. 70–71).

**EMPHASIZE:** *The purpose of spiritual gifts is not to build up individuals, but to benefit the church. Direct attention to **Pack Item 3** (Key Verse: 2 Corinthians 5:20), and lead the group to discuss how our individual and collective spiritual gifts help us to be better ambassadors for Christ. To further guide the discussion, ask: *How does the variety of gifts in a church give greater value to the giftedness of an individual? Why might a person devalue the role or gift God has given him? How can a person protect himself from devaluing his giftedness?* (PSG, p. 71)*

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## SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

**REVIEW:** Lead in a review of the bulleted statements listed under In My Context (PSG, p. 72). Invite volunteers to name which verses from today's session support each of the statements.

**RESPOND:** Direct attention to the information about a Spiritual Gifts Survey in the second question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 72): *Seek to identify the spiritual gift(s) God has given you. (You can find a spiritual gifts inventory in the downloads under the resources tab at [Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploreTheBible](http://Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploreTheBible).) How are you using your gift to build up your local church? What actions do you need to take to be more effective?* Encourage everyone to complete the survey following the session.

**PRAY:** Lead in prayer, thanking God for each believer's special gift from God. Pray for the group as they use their God-given spiritual gifts in kingdom work.



## PRACTICE

- Pray for your group and your church, praising God for the gifts He has given and for those who are using them in His service.
- Write notes to your group, thanking them for using their specific gifts for the Lord.
- Remind everyone to complete the spiritual gifts inventory online. (You can find a spiritual gifts inventory in the downloads under the resources tab at [Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploreTheBible](http://Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploreTheBible).) Assure them that you are praying for them as they seek to identify and use the gifts God has given them.

## MORE IDEAS

### FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

To supplement the Focus Attention activity, before the session, invite volunteers to bring a small amount of their favorite pre-packaged snack foods, such as chips, candy, or cookies. Be mindful of any food allergies in the group. Provide a large serving container, and ask volunteers to pour their snacks in the container. Begin the session by noting that the mixture is very diverse, yet it serves one purpose: to be used by the group. Provide napkins and bowls, and then invite the group to sample the mixture during the session.

### EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To enhance the discussion of 1 Corinthians 12:4-6, lead group members to brainstorm the variety of ministries and activities in your church. Invite volunteers to share which ministries and activities in which they serve. Record their responses. Discuss: *Why is it important for each believer to realize that God has uniquely gifted him or her? What are the dangers of wanting to be gifted in a different way?* (PSG, p. 66)
- To provide additional insight into 1 Corinthians 12:7-10, lead the group to discuss how having multiple gifts within a church body allows many different needs to be met. Share about times when the abilities of many worked together to help others both inside and outside your small group or entire church.
- To supplement discussion of 1 Corinthians 12:11-12,21-26, form two teams. Instruct each team to think of a way, other than the human body, to illustrate what Paul taught in this passage. Lead groups to restate 1 Corinthians 12:12,21 with the different analogy. Invite groups to share what they emphasized and why.

### SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Lead group members to reflect on how God has used individuals to make a difference in His church. Suggest that the group write notes of appreciation to those who have influenced their lives by sharing their spiritual gifts.

### SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

Use the song “If We Are the Body,” by Casting Crowns, as a time of commitment. Encourage the group to prayerfully commit to using individual gifts to serve God.

# UNDERSTANDING LOVE

Believers are to be motivated by love when serving others.

## 1 CORINTHIANS 13:1-13

**MEMORY VERSE: 1 CORINTHIANS 13:4**

- **READ** 1 Corinthians 13:1–14:40; 16:1-24, First Thoughts (p. 84), and Understand the Context (pp. 84–85). Focus on the different adjectives Paul used to describe love. Ponder how each adjective gives a different nuance to his description of love.
- **STUDY** 1 Corinthians 13:1-13, using Explore the Text (pp. 85–89). Notice that Paul intentionally inserted this digression about love between 1 Corinthians 12–14, which focus on divisions and problems within the Corinthian church. Read 1 Corinthians 16:14 and note that Paul expressed love at the end of his letter saturated with commands, rebukes, and exhortations.
- **PLAN** the group time using ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 90–91), More Ideas (p. 92), and ideas in *QuickSource* to develop a plan to address the needs of your group. Other ideas to customize your session may be found online at [Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible/Adults/LeaderExtras](http://Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible/Adults/LeaderExtras).
- **GROW** with other group leaders at the Groups Ministry blog ([LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry](http://LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry)).
- **GATHER** the following items:  Personal Study Guides;  Pens;  Paper hearts or copies of paper with a heart on it. Make copies of:  **PACK ITEM 8** (*Handout: Paul's List of Spiritual Gifts*). Prepare to display the following Pack Item: and  **PACK ITEM 3** (*Key Verse: 2 Corinthians 5:20*). For More Ideas (p. 92):  **PACK ITEM 2** (*Outline: 1,2 Corinthians*);  A mirror.



## KEY DOCTRINE

### *Kingdom*

The full consummation of the kingdom awaits the return of Jesus Christ and the end of this age.

## BIBLE SKILL

*Create a compare/contrast chart to study a passage.*

Review 1 Corinthians 13 and create a chart. In one column, list words and phrases that are not characteristic of love. In a second column, list words and phrases that are characteristic of love. What insights do you gain by comparing the two lists? Are any opposites included? What action gives you the greatest trouble? Which action do you find the most significant?

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# FIRST THOUGHTS

Love is one of the most common themes found in music, literature, and film. Arguably, there is an angle of love in nearly every story, whether it is the desire for love, the loss of love, or complicated love. Love is a common human experience. We love family and friends, and we search for that true love with whom we can share our lives.

(In PSG, p. 73) **What song, movie, or book comes to your mind when you think about the topic of love? What line or scene stands out? How is love portrayed in that song or story?**

First Corinthians 13 is among the most influential and beloved chapters in all of Paul's writings. It's been the subject of thousands of sermons. It's been recited at countless wedding ceremonies. In this week's lesson, we'll seek to understand Paul's view of love as he challenged the Corinthians regarding the necessity of love, the nature of love, and the permanence of love.

# UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

## 1 CORINTHIANS 13:1–14:40; 16:1-24

Several weeks ago, because of calendar considerations, we leap-frogged ahead in our study of 1 Corinthians to consider chapter 15, Paul's teaching about the resurrection of Jesus. After that, we returned to our usual chapter-by-chapter sequence. So it's fitting that we conclude our study of 1 Corinthians with chapter 13 and what the apostle taught about love. As you may recall from last week's study, this teaching on love falls in the middle of his detailed discussion of spiritual gifts (chaps. 12–14). The broader passage from which this week's lesson is taken consists of chapters 13; 14; and 16 of the epistle. The following major points about these chapters may be noted:

- Love: the superior way (13:1-13)
- Prophecy: a superior gift (14:1-25)
- Order in church meetings (14:26-40)
- The resurrection (15:1-58)
- Collection for the Jerusalem church (16:1-4)
- Paul's travel plans (16:5-12)
- Final exhortation (16:13-18)
- Conclusion (16:19-24)

As we focus our attention on love in this study, we'll see that the main point Paul made was that believers are to be motivated by love when serving others. This principle is not only a fitting summary of 1 Corinthians 13, it is a terrific reminder to us of our primary takeaway from our study of this important letter in the New Testament.

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

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

The apostle affirmed that the exercise of spiritual gifts is useless if a person does not have love. Throughout this lesson, “love” refers to *agapé* in the original language of chapter 13. Such love is to be understood as supernatural, sacrificial giving of oneself to others whether they deserve it or not.

#### VERSE 1

Paul began with an example of an exaggeration in the use of the spiritual gift of **human or angelic tongues**. This included the “tongues” which the Corinthians prized (see 1 Cor. 14); he may very well also have had in mind Spirit-enabled eloquence in preaching. It would be rare for a Christian to excel in multiple kinds of speech, earthly and ecstatic. Yet these persons might speak in such a way as to be full of self-importance or desire to build their own reputation rather than to build up others in the body of Christ. They were showoffs.

Such speakers are no better off than if they were percussion instruments apart from a band. The terms **noisy** and **clanging** suggest harsh, meaningless racket. The apostle’s opening volley surely shocked the Corinthians, many of whom had congratulated themselves on their gift of languages or tongues. It was, however, just noise apart from love.

#### VERSE 2

Paul next mentioned four additional spiritual gifts that can be exercised without love. He was likely referring to specific gifts he had listed in 12:8-10 (see commentary in last week’s study). **Prophecy** involved speaking the words of God. The phrase **understand all mysteries** may have been a way of referring to the “message of wisdom” (12:8). **All knowledge** looked back on the “message of knowledge” (12:8). **Faith** is an extraordinary ability to trust God. The apostle gave an extreme example of what such faith can accomplish: **I can move mountains**. Paul almost certainly had in mind what Jesus had once taught about mountain-moving faith (Mark 11:23).

Just as the apostle had spoken about the gift of languages or tongues with exaggeration, so now he mentioned these additional gifts with hyperbole. Nobody has *all* knowledge or *all* faith. Yet even if someone, for example, has unlimited knowledge, unless that knowledge is exercised out of genuine love for others, it’s of no value. In Paul’s words, **I am nothing**.

### BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read “‘Love’ in Paul’s Writings” and “QuickBites: Four Greek Terms for ‘Love’” in the Spring 2018 issue of Biblical Illustrator. Available at [LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator](http://LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator).

#### 1 CORINTHIANS 13:1

<sup>1</sup>If I speak human or angelic tongues but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

#### 1 CORINTHIANS 13:2

<sup>2</sup>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.

## 1 CORINTHIANS 13:3

<sup>3</sup> 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.

### VERSE 3

The two examples Paul noted here are not so much the exercise of specific spiritual gifts as they are charitable self-sacrifice. Yet these sacrificial acts were actually done selfishly. An extreme example is giving away **all my possessions** to feed the poor (as Jesus asked the rich young ruler to do; Mark 10:21). Many Christians in Jerusalem sold their assets and gave the money to the apostles to use, but the sad story of Ananias and Sapphira showed that this could be done for the wrong reason (Acts 5:1-11).

Paul knew from experience the meaning of the phrase **if I give over my body**. He had been beaten and imprisoned. But it is possible to be persecuted and even to be physically abused for the wrong reasons. If someone is in it so that they will be looked up to, they **gain nothing**. The manuscripts in the original language differ at this point. Some refer to a Christian giving his or her body **in order to boast**, while others refer to giving one's body "to hardship" or "to be burned," referring to painful martyrdom. Not everything that looks like Christian charity actually is charity, Paul was saying.

**What steps could you take to evaluate your motivation for how you serve others? How can you ensure that you are using your gifts motivated by love, rather than some selfish motive?**

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## 1 CORINTHIANS 13:4-5

<sup>4</sup> Love is patient, love is kind. Love does not envy, is not boastful, is not arrogant, <sup>5</sup> is not rude, is not self-seeking, is not irritable, and does not keep a record of wrongs.

### VERSES 4-5

Paul provided a number of descriptions—both negative and positive—to illustrate the nature of genuine love. The list is like popcorn flying out of the popper. Quickly Paul described love, what it is like and what it is not like. We see that the *agapé* he was talking about is not limited to a feeling or emotion. Love is a choice, that by God's grace, believers can learn to exercise.

**Patient.** An old-fashioned translation is "longsuffering." This means enduring difficult people, rather than being patient with circumstances. It is part of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22).

**Kind.** This is similar to patience but deals with the manner with which we treat others more than the time it takes to deal with difficult persons. Kindness includes gentleness, even when correcting someone. Kindness and patience are closely related in the fruit of the Spirit passage.

**Does not envy.** Admiring others for their positive qualities or desiring to have such qualities for ourselves may turn into resentment or jealousy. If we love, we won't be displeased by the success of others. Some of the Corinthians were jealous of the spiritual gifts of others (1 Cor. 14:20).

**Not boastful.** This term appears only here in the New Testament. It means bragging about one's own achievements. We might call such a person a windbag.

**Not arrogant.** The essence of pride is self-importance and a refusal to submit to God or others. Love for others means we won't be arrogant.

**Not rude.** Love is courteous. Rudeness is never acceptable for the one who loves others as Christ did. When we respect others in our attitudes and actions, we are showing love. Paul likely had in mind the unruly worship practices of the Corinthians (11:17-22).

**Not self seeking.** Love is the opposite of putting oneself in first place. We are called to esteem others ahead of ourselves. Jesus' incarnation and humility are the supreme example (Phil. 2:4-8).

**Not irritable.** Those who love aren't touchy or easily offended. There is a time for righteous anger, however, when others are treated unfairly or oppressed.

**Does not keep a record of wrongs.** Paul may have known that Jesus taught the importance of forgiving others "seventy times seven" (Matt. 18:22). Love does not harbor grievances or resentment.

#### VERSES 6-7

The positive characteristics of love that Paul mentioned are attributes of God Himself. "God is love" (1 John 4:8). In His earthly life and death, Jesus perfectly demonstrated love. On the other hand, some of the Corinthian believers had demonstrated what love is not, as we have seen throughout these lessons. Paul longed for his friends to grow in love, thereby becoming more like God Himself.

**Finds no joy in unrighteousness.** Sadly, it seems to be human nature to gloat over the misfortune of others, whether disaster or evil. The Corinthians had been unashamed of sexual sin in their midst (1 Cor. 5:1-6). Those who truly love can never be happy when others fall into immorality.

**Rejoices in the truth.** This balances what Paul had just said. Note the contrast between "unrighteousness" and "truth." Truth here must mean "living according to God's truth." Love includes being happy when we see others living in line with the truth of the gospel.

**Bears all things.** The verb is capable of two meanings. It may mean "endure" or "cover, protect." If Paul meant the former, then love puts up with offenses. If he meant the latter, then love covers over the weaknesses of others. Love does not want others to be embarrassed.

**Believes all things.** Obviously we are not supposed to believe what is false. Paul did not mean we should be gullible or easily deceived. Rather, when we love, we give others the benefit of the doubt rather than believing the worst about them.

**Hopes all things.** Hope looks forward expectantly. Hope means that we believe God will work things for good. Setbacks and failures are not permanent. Christ will finish the good work He has begun in believers (Phil. 1:6). "Believes" and "hopes" are verb forms of the nouns "faith" and "hope," which along with "love" will last forever (13:13).

**Endures all things.** Love is not quenched by the offenses and failings of others. It shows itself to be true love when it patiently puts up with people. Like good soldiers, we are called to endure.

#### 1 CORINTHIANS 13:6-7

<sup>6</sup> Love finds no joy in unrighteousness but rejoices in the truth.

<sup>7</sup> It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

**Which of the positive descriptions of love do you find the most challenging in your own life? What can you do to be more intentional about expressing love in this way? Which of the negative descriptions is the easiest for you? How can you be more intentional about rooting that characteristic out of your life?**

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### 1 CORINTHIANS 13:8

<sup>8</sup> 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.

### 1 CORINTHIANS 13:9-10

<sup>9</sup> For we know in part, and we prophesy in part, <sup>10</sup> but when the perfect comes, the partial will come to an end.

### 1 CORINTHIANS 13:11

<sup>11</sup> 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.

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

### VERSE 8

**Love never ends** because it is rooted in the eternal God. Love existed when there was only God. Thus in this life, when we love like God does, we are engaging in an eternal activity. Moreover, the love we experience in this life will continue on—perfected, of course—in the eternal state.

The apostle contrasted this eternal love to three temporary spiritual gifts. They belong to this life only. He had mentioned them in 13:1-2. Here he taught that their use is temporary, not everlasting. **Prophecies** will not be needed in eternity. The Lord God will then speak directly to His people because He will live with them; spokesmen on His behalf will be needless (Rev. 21:3). The spiritual gift of **tongues** will similarly be superfluous. Further, there will be no need of the spiritual gift of **knowledge**, for we will have direct access to God's own knowledge.

### VERSES 9-10

Paul now keyed in on the incomplete nature of prophecy and knowledge in this life. God has never revealed everything to a particular prophet, or to all the prophets combined. Those filled with wisdom or knowledge, no matter how brilliant or supernaturally gifted, have never received all knowledge. This is simply part of the earthly human condition. At some point in the future, such gifts as knowledge and prophecy will come to an end.

The apostle described this time as when the perfect comes. **Perfect** can be rendered “completeness” or “maturity” or “fulfillment.” Bible students have offered differing interpretations as to exactly what Paul meant. The death of believers, when they will be with Christ? The second coming of Christ? Verse 12, with its reference to “then face to face,” supports the idea that the time spiritual gifts will end is the Lord's return.

### VERSE 11

Paul illustrated the distinction between the partial and the perfect by referring to the life of a typical person. It's normal for **a child** to behave like a child, both in speech and thinking and reasoning. Then comes the time to grow up. Childhood must be left behind. Baby talk has its place for a two-year-old. In a thirty-year-old, it's unbecoming.

Tongues and knowledge and prophecy are like that. They belong to childhood (this life) rather than adulthood (eternity). Just as we can't

conceive of an adult resorting to baby talk (except for fun), so we shouldn't imagine spiritual gifts lasting into eternity. The verb **put aside** suggests intentional decision. Paul was asking believers to recognize the futility of emphasizing what belongs only to this life and determine to focus on things eternal.

#### VERSE 12

The apostle offered a second illustration of the distinction between the partial and the perfect. He mentioned the image seen in **a mirror**. The best mirrors available in the first century were polished metal, often brass or bronze. The reflection was indistinct or dim compared to the clear image we are accustomed to today.

Imagine being able to see a loved one only in a mirror. A reflection is a poor substitute for a real person. In this life, our experiences of spiritual gifts are like reflected images that partially reveal Christ and eternal realities. When He returns, we will see Him **face to face**. Reflected images will be unnecessary.

Our knowledge of Christ and heavenly things in this life is genuine but only partial. Paul confessed that **now I know in part**. He longed for the time that **I will know fully**. He and all God's people will know the Lord intimately and as fully as is possible for a finite being to know Him. Paul added that in this life **I am fully known** by Christ. Just as Christ already knows believers fully, so there is coming a time when, no longer marred by the effects of sin, we will have as full a knowledge of God as we can attain.

#### VERSE 13

Paul concluded his teaching on love as “an even better way” (12:31) with a summary statement. He reminded the believers that he had emphasized three great virtues throughout his preaching and teaching. Now he declared that they last forever. **Faith** had been Paul's teaching on how we are saved. We are joined to Christ by faith alone (Rom. 1:16-17). We live by faith (Gal. 2:20). **Hope** was Paul's focus for discussing the future benefits of salvation, such as the resurrection body (1 Cor. 15). The greatness of **love**, of course, stands as the grand theme of 1 Corinthians 13.

Then Paul showed the centrality of Christian love by raising it above faith and hope. All three of the eternal virtues eclipse all spiritual gifts. Yet **the greatest of these is love**. Again, “God is love.” (Scripture never says that “God is faith” or “God is hope.”) If love is supreme, then all Christians have the responsibility of attempting to show in the way we live what Paul's teaching has come to mean for us.

**How would you go about determining what you value the most? How do you face the reality that only a few things—love especially—last forever?**

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#### 1 CORINTHIANS 13:12

<sup>12</sup> 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.

#### 1 CORINTHIANS 13:13

<sup>13</sup> Now these three remain: faith, hope, and love — but the greatest of these is love.

# LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

## FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

**LIST:** Prior to the group's arrival, cut out paper hearts or make copies of a paper with a heart on it. Display the question "What is love?" somewhere in the room. As the group arrives, give each person a pen and paper heart (or paper with heart on it) and ask him or her to write a response to the question on the board on the heart. Collect the responses.

**INTRODUCE:** After most have arrived, read aloud what was written on the hearts. Invite the group to add further responses. After responses, read aloud the paragraph on page 73 of the PSG about love.

**TRANSITION:** *While love is a common human experience, agape love is uniquely Christian. Agape is sacrificial giving of oneself to others, whether they deserve it or not. In this week's study, we'll seek to understand Paul's view of agape as he challenged the Corinthians regarding the necessity for such love.*

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

**GUIDE:** Briefly refer to the last session about spiritual gifts, and then read 1 Corinthians 12:31. Say: *Paul wanted to show the Corinthians the way of love. Believers who use their gifts motivated by love will make the greatest impact.*

**READ:** Direct a volunteer to read aloud 1 Corinthians 13:1-3, and encourage the rest of the group to listen for how Paul positioned the necessity of love in regard to spiritual gifts.

**SAY:** *If a person does not have love, the exercise of his or her spiritual gift is useless. Love is more than a feeling but also a willful action.*

**MINI-LECTURE:** Use information in the second paragraph under Verse 1 on page 75 of the PSG to give a mini-lecture about the three types of love in the New Testament environment (*agape, eros, and philia*). Lead the group to come up with a working definition of *agape*.

**GUIDE:** Briefly review **Pack Item 8** (*Handout: Paul's Lists of Spiritual Gifts*). Then use information under Verses 2-3 (PSG, pp. 75-76) to explain what it means for spiritual gifts to function with love. Ask: *What would it look like for spiritual gifts to function without love? How would that change the impact of the gifts?*

**HIGHLIGHT:** *Notice that Paul positioned love as a necessity before describing what love is.*

**DISCUSS:** *Why do you think Paul tackled these issues before describing what love is? What modern day priorities or activities do we elevate that Paul might have declared to be "nothing" without love? (PSG, p. 76)*

**TRANSITION:** *Next, Paul presented a series of descriptors to illustrate the nature of love.*

**READ:** Invite a volunteer to read aloud 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, as the group listens for characteristics of love.

**CHART:** Follow the directions in the Bible Skill activity on page 78 of the PSG to create a chart: *Review 1 Corinthians 13 and create a chart. In one column, list words and phrases that are not characteristic of love. In a second column, list words and phrases that are characteristic of love. What insights do you gain by comparing the two lists? Are any opposites included? What action gives you the greatest trouble? Which action do you find the most significant?*

**ILLUSTRATE:** Use information under Verses 4-7 (PSG, pp. 77-78) to illustrate the significance of each characteristic. Note that the negative descriptors connect with the lifestyle being exhibited by the Corinthian believers. Ask: *How are these characteristics of love, negative and positive, demonstrated in today's world?* Encourage volunteers to name specific examples.

**SAY:** *God is characterized as love, and those who follow Him should exhibit that same kind of love.*

**GUIDE:** Point out **Pack Item 3** (Key Verse: 2 Corinthians 5:20). Lead in a discussion of how God being love impacts our words and actions with others as His ambassadors.

**DISCUSS:** *How is the description of love given by Paul seen in God's character? How does substituting the word "love" with "God" give you a better understanding of the relationship between the love defined by Paul and the character to God?* (PSG, p 78)

**READ:** Direct someone to read aloud 1 Corinthians 13:8-13, asking the group to listen for Paul's evidence that love is permanent.

**SAY:** *Paul contrasted love with other things valued by the Corinthians, emphasizing that of all the things valued on earth, only love is eternal.*

**CHART:** Lead the group to add to the chart additional characteristics of what love is and is not, based on the passage.

**EXPLAIN:** Use the information under Verse 13 (PSG, p. 80) to explain the permanence of the virtues faith, hope, and love. Say: *Believers should base their lives on things that have an eternal duration, with love being one such item.*

**DISCUSS:** *What is the relationship between faith, hope, and love? Can a person have faith, hope, and love apart from a relationship with Jesus? Explain.* (PSG, p. 80)

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## **SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)**

**REVIEW:** Recall the paper heart exercise completed at the beginning of the session. Invite volunteers to answer the question "What is love?" with new insights gained during the study. Read the three bulleted statements under In My Context (PSG, p. 81).

**CHALLENGE:** Call attention to the second question set under In My Context in the PSG on page 81: *As a group, identify actions the group needs to take to better demonstrate the kind of love described in this passage. List one thing you can do to help your group better demonstrate this kind of love.*

**PRAY:** Close in prayer, asking God to help the group act on the actions identified during the session.



## PRACTICE

- Focus your mind and heart this week on the *agape* love described by Paul in 1 Corinthians 13. As you study, examine your motives for serving in the church. To what extent do your motives align with the teachings of Paul in 1 Corinthians 13?
- Contact the group during the week, reminding them to use their gifts motivated by love. Pray for them as they serve others through love.
- Affirm people who are leading in other areas of the church who at one time were part of your group by sending them a note of appreciation. Make sure to include them in any future fellowship or ministry activities planned by your group.

## MORE IDEAS

### FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

To supplement the Focus Attention activity, lead group members to reflect on the theme of love in music, literature, and film. Discuss: *What song, movie, or book comes to your mind when you think about the topic of love? What line or scene stands out? How is love portrayed in that song or story?* (PSG, p. 73)

### EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To supplement the discussion of 1 Corinthians 13:1-3, direct attention to **Pack Item 2** (*Outline: 1,2 Corinthians*) and point out that Paul intentionally inserted a discussion of love in his comments about spiritual gifts within the Corinthian church. Lead the group to consider how love affects our use of spiritual gifts and how, when used properly, spiritual gifts can bring unity to a church.
- To enhance your discussion of 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, direct attention to the memory verse for the week (1 Cor. 13:4). Invite volunteers to share testimonies of how they have experienced love as described in the verse. Be prepared to share your own testimony.
- To illustrate 1 Corinthians 13:8-13, display a mirror. Focus on verse 12. Discuss how a reflected image is imperfect and only represents the reality of what it projects. Compare a reflected image to seeing face to face.

### SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Refer to the chart developed during the session, which lists words and phrases that are characteristics of love. Then lead the group to complete the first question set under In My Context in the PSG on page 81: *Read 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 and replace the word “love” with your name. What actions do you need to take to make what you just read true?*

### SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

Play a recording of “Your Love,” by The Life Church. Invite the group to listen for words and phrases that remind them of 1 Corinthians 13.

# ENJOYING GOD'S COMFORT

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

## 2 CORINTHIANS 1:3-14

### MEMORY VERSE: 2 CORINTHIANS 1:4

- **READ** 2 Corinthians 1:1–2:13, First Thoughts (p. 94), and Understand the Context (pp. 94–95). As you read, notice the balance between Paul's affliction and God's comfort. Reflect on the session title. Consider your answer to the question, *How can God's presence help believers find His comfort while experiencing hard times?*
- **STUDY** 2 Corinthians 1:3-14. As you review Explore the Text (pp. 95–99), record your responses to the questions included. Consult the *Explore The Bible Adult Commentary* (available in print and digital format from LifeWay.com) for additional insight.
- **PLAN** the group time using ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 100–101) and More Ideas (p. 102). Consult *QuickSource* for additional discussion questions (available from LifeWay.com).
- **GROW** from expert insights on weekly studies through the Ministry Grid (MinistryGrid.com/Web/ExploretheBible).
- **GATHER** the following items:  Personal Study Guides;  Signs reading "Comfort Zone" and "Out of Comfort Zone." Make copies as needed of:  **PACK ITEM 7** (*Handout: Corinthians Time Line*); and  **PACK ITEM 13** (*Handout: Memory Verses Bookmark*; also available on the Leader Pack CD-ROM). Prepare to display:  **PACK ITEM 2** (*Outline: 1,2 Corinthians*). For More Ideas (p. 102):  **PACK ITEM 1** (*Map: Paul's Second Missionary Journey*);  Two volunteers to have a debate; and  A Bible dictionary.



## KEY DOCTRINE

### *God the Father*

God as Father reigns with providential care over His universe, His creatures, and the flow of the stream of human history according to the purposes of His grace.

## BIBLE SKILL

*Use a Bible atlas and Bible dictionary (print version or on the Internet) to learn about places mentioned in Scripture.*

Find the locations of Corinth and Ephesus, and the provinces of Asia and Macedonia in a Bible atlas. (Tip: check the atlas index or search on the Internet.) Then use a Bible dictionary to learn more about these places during the time of Paul. How do these places enter into an understanding of the background of 2 Corinthians? What motivated Paul to continue to plant churches in these areas knowing the difficulty he would face?

# FIRST THOUGHTS

Consider the different ways we use the phrase “comfort zone.” It can refer to a mental state in which people feel familiar with and in control of their circumstances. There’s also a negative sense for “comfort zone.” We may be urged to get out of our comfort zone—take risks, attempt things we’ve never done before.

(In PSG, p. 82) **What kinds of situations would you consider to be in your “comfort zone”? What things have you recently attempted that were “outside your comfort zone”? What are the advantages of staying in your comfort zone and of going outside your comfort zone?**

Paul undeniably lived outside his comfort zone as a traveling church planter. He was called by God to take the gospel where it had never been proclaimed. Helped by God’s Spirit, he gladly faced unbelievable risks. As we’ll see in this week’s study, he had recently been so overwhelmed that he thought he would die (2 Cor. 1:8).

Paul, however, was not beyond needing comfort in the midst of these trials. He knew that comfort can come both from God and from others. He began 2 Corinthians by praising God for the comfort He had given him. Further, Paul explained to the believers that divine comfort extended both from him to them and from them to him. Christians can find comfort in knowing that others benefit from their trials and that God is honored through such trials.

# UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

## 2 CORINTHIANS 1:1–2:13

In our just-completed studies in 1 Corinthians, we learned that Paul had written to the believers of Corinth from Ephesus in the Roman province of Asia (Acts 19). After he concluded his Ephesian ministry, he “departed to go to Macedonia” (Acts 20:1). No doubt he visited the churches he had previously planted in Macedonian cities, such as Philippi and Thessalonica (Acts 17–18). While the apostle was in Macedonia, he met up with Titus, his partner in ministry whom he had sent as his ambassador to Corinth. Titus brought good news to Paul about the state of the Corinthian congregation. There had been repentance and a restoration of fellowship between Paul and the Corinthians (7:5-7). Paul was then prompted by the Spirit to write 2 Corinthians, partly in response to the report he had received from Titus.

The context passage for this week’s lesson includes verses from two sections of the epistle. As was always the case, Paul began his letters with a

salutation, wherein he named himself as the author, noted the recipient, and offered a grace greeting (1:1-2). In many of his letters, Paul next wrote a heartfelt prayer of thanksgiving to God for the first readers (for example, 1 Cor. 1:4-9). In 2 Corinthians, however, instead of thanksgiving Paul expressed praise to God for being the source of comfort for him (2 Cor. 1:3-11). This week's focal verses give attention to this wonderful praise to God that the apostle composed.

As he began the body of the letter, Paul's next concern was to give the Corinthians an expanded account of his ministry (1:12-7:16). His first topic was to update his friends on his travels, which were different than what he had originally planned (1:12-2:13). Thus, as the final part of this week's lesson, we will focus our attention on how Paul introduced his travels to the Corinthians (1:12-14). He concluded this account of his itinerary by explaining, "I did not find my brother Titus [in Troas]. Instead, I said goodbye to them and left for Macedonia" (2:13).

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

### COMFORTED (2 COR. 1:3-7)

Paul explained that God comforts believers in the middle of difficulties, knowing that God is working for their good, for the expansion of the gospel, and for the benefit of others.

#### VERSE 3

Paul adopted a prayer style from the Old Testament, for example Psalm 41:13: "Blessed be the LORD God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting." The apostle, however, provided a New Testament modification by describing God as the **Father of our Lord Jesus Christ**. As followers of Jesus, we relate to God as the One who sent Jesus to our world.

Paul acknowledged God as the source of **mercies** and of **all comfort**. Again, he was thinking of the teaching of Scripture (Isa. 40:1; 51:12; 66:13). *Mercies* refers to God's attitude of compassion for those who are suffering. *Comfort* refers to the relief God extends to those who hurt. God's attitude leads to action. Paul led with this glowing description of God; he was about to describe his own trials, in which God had taken action.

#### VERSE 4

In the original language of this verse, the word for "comfort" occurs four times. A verb form is found three times: **He comforts ... we may be able to comfort**; and **we ourselves receive** (literally, "we ourselves are comforted"). Both noun and verb are closely related to the title for the Holy Spirit that Jesus initiated in such verses as John 14:16; 15:26; 16:7. This title has been translated "Comforter," "Helper," "Advocate," and "Counselor." These renderings suggest the broad sense that this word group carried.

In the present context, Paul contrasted *comfort* with **affliction**, mentioned two times. His first reference to affliction was to his

### BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read "Comfort: A Word Study," available digitally in the Spring 2018 Biblical Illustrator for Explore the Bible at LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator.

### 2 CORINTHIANS 1:3

<sup>3</sup> Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort.

### 2 CORINTHIANS 1:4

<sup>4</sup> 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.

own experiences; the second reference was to the difficult circumstances of other believers. *Affliction* is closely related to a verb that meant literally “to press hard, to crush,” or by extension, “to experience trouble.”

Note that Paul employed the plural, using **us** and **we** language, although he was referring to himself. He followed this pattern throughout the letter, and unless context requires others to be included in the plural usage, readers should assume that Paul was referring to himself. Writers of Scripture only partially explain why God allows people to suffer. A part of the answer that Paul affirmed is that suffering equips God’s people to comfort other sufferers. In such cases, the original sufferers often feel that their troubles were worth it because this prepared them to comfort others.

## 2 CORINTHIANS 1:5-7

<sup>5</sup> For just as the sufferings of Christ overflow to us, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.

<sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> 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.

### VERSE 5

Paul was united to Christ. He was called on to endure sufferings similar to what our Lord endured (see 2 Cor. 11:23-27). Paul willingly imitated Christ’s example for the sake of others, just as Jesus had predicted would happen to His closest followers (Matt. 20:23). After Jesus had suffered, He received the joy and glory of God’s comfort by being resurrected (Heb. 12:2). As one joined to Christ not only in His death but also in His resurrection, Paul already had a share in the divine comfort Jesus received. This **comfort**, the apostle said, **overflows**. Paul could no more keep this comfort to himself than a river at flood stage can keep within its banks.

### VERSE 6

Church planting and affliction for Christ’s sake regularly went hand in hand for Paul. This was the case in Corinth (Acts 18:1-17). There is no denying that if Paul had not willingly put up with persecution, the Corinthians would never have heard the gospel. They would never have come to salvation. Moreover, the comfort that Paul had received from God strengthened him to persevere, which in turn channeled God’s comfort to the Corinthians when they were afflicted. They saw Paul’s example and went through **the same sufferings** that he endured. Because they witnessed Paul’s receiving God’s comfort, they too were comforted in a way that resulted in **endurance** in difficult circumstances. Such endurance enabled them (as well as believers today) to wait for Christ to put an end to all trials when He returns.

### VERSE 7

We know from our studies in 1 Corinthians—and we will see additionally in 2 Corinthians—that these believers had a full measure of problems, some of which were self-inflicted. Yet Paul was full of assurance about them. He was confident of a positive future for these believers: **our hope for you is firm**. How could he be so sure? They enjoyed the marks of genuine salvation, including not only a **share in the sufferings** of Christ (like Paul, 1:5) but also a **share in the comfort** of Christ (also like Paul). Surely it reassured these believers to hear that their troubles, far from indicating God had abandoned them, actually meant that they were well placed to receive comfort and endurance.

(In PSG, p. 86) **How might the sufferings of a believer be used by God to impact the lives of others? How does a person's attitude when facing suffering influence others? To what examples can you point to illustrate your response?**

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

### VERSES 8-9

The apostle now updated his Corinthian friends on his recent troubles. He introduced to them an **affliction that took place in •Asia**, the Roman province in the western part of what we now call Asia Minor (modern Turkey). While he had focused his Asian ministry in the coastal city of Ephesus, the gospel penetrated the interior, “so that all the residents of Asia, both Jews and Greeks, heard the word of the Lord” (Acts 19:10). His ministry there later concluded in a riot (19:21-41), but he apparently escaped harm on that occasion. Thus, we do not know what specific life-or-death circumstances he was writing about in verse 8.

Bible students have speculated about what situation was so severe that he **despaired of life** and believed he personally had a **sentence of death**. A case has been made that he faced a severe sickness that took him to death's door. Others have thought that he was seriously persecuted by a mob (see 1 Cor. 15:32). The situation had **overwhelmed** him (literally, “weighted down”) and he **despaired**. On the upside, however, this deadly condition became an occasion for him not to rely on himself. Rather, he looked to **God who raises the dead**. Even if Paul had experienced bodily death in this crisis, he was confident of his future resurrection. When circumstances are totally beyond our ability to cope, we truly learn to trust in God.

**When circumstances are totally beyond our ability to cope, we truly learn to trust in God.**

### VERSE 10

The deadly situation had passed, due neither to Paul's ability nor to natural circumstances. Rather, God had intervened and **delivered us from such a terrible death**. Paul was using the language of the psalms of deliverance (for example, Ps. 40:1-3). Further, he was confident that God would **deliver** him **again** when the occasion—and the will of God—called for it. As he looked to the future, he enthusiastically placed his hope in God. Indeed, in his last letter Paul wrote about another deliverance from death: “So I was rescued from the lion's mouth” (2 Tim. 4:17). As he faced the end of his earthly pilgrimage, however, he recognized that his ultimate deliverance lay through death's door: “the time for my departure is close. ... There is reserved for me the crown of righteousness” (4:6,8).

## 2 CORINTHIANS 1:8-9

<sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> 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.

## 2 CORINTHIANS 1:10

<sup>10</sup> 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

## 2 CORINTHIANS 1:11

<sup>11</sup> 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.

### VERSE 11

Paul turned his thoughts from the future to the present moment. He wrote to the Corinthians about their role in his deliverance and what the immediate outcome had been. The Corinthian believers had helped him by their prayers. Prayer is a resource God has provided to His people. He longs for His people to pray and intercede on behalf of others. As James wrote in his letter, “The prayer of a righteous person is very powerful in its effect” (Jas. 5:16).

Further, when God answers the specific prayers of Christians, there is meant to be an outburst of thanksgiving and praise to God because of **the gift** of God’s answer to the petition. Paul reminded the Corinthians that their prayers for him had helped him and had truly brought praise to God. When many make petitions, then **many will give thanks** to God for His answers. Because God longs for His people to worship Him, He has arranged circumstances that encourage us to come to Him, whether in petition or in praise.

**What situation have you faced that you recognized, either at the time or later, as a test of your faith? How did the prayers of others play a part in God’s strengthening you? To what extent did you experience God’s deliverance, in which He demonstrated His power?**

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## 2 CORINTHIANS 1:12

<sup>12</sup> 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.

### VERSE 12

With this verse Paul pivoted from his praise to God (1:3-11) to the body of the letter. As he began explaining why his travel plans had changed, he chose to begin by making a strong statement: his actions sprang from a clear conscience and full integrity. He boldly asserted his confidence in his behavior.

The object of Paul’s confidence was not himself but rather what God had enabled him to be and do. Thus, he gladly reported **the testimony of our conscience**. He had integrity. His conduct wherever he went **in the world**, and particularly when he had related to the Corinthians, was above reproach. Of course, the conscience is a fallible guide to right and wrong behavior, so twice in this verse the apostle indicated that his conduct was blessed by God. It had been God-given and had happened only **by God’s grace**. On a positive note, his conduct had been **with godly sincerity and purity**. Negatively, Paul’s course of action had occurred **not by human wisdom**, that is, he had not behaved according to natural impulses, characterized by self-interest.

## VERSES 13-14

Some persons in the Corinthian congregation thought Paul's preaching and his writings were intentionally obscure or even misleading (see his vehement refutation in 2 Cor. 11). Here, he was making the point that his objective in his letters was to be a clear communicator. His aim was to write so that the readers can **read** and **understand** his meaning. In general, we affirm Paul's claim to clarity, even though in some passages Paul's meaning is not obvious to us. Compared to teachers of other religions of the day, however, Paul's message was clear. He deliberately avoided philosophical argumentation and human wisdom. He opted for the plain, not the fancy, in his preaching and teaching. As he had written in the first epistle, "I did not come with brilliance of speech or wisdom. I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:1-2).

The apostle was aware, however, that the Corinthians only partially understood that he was a reliable, trustworthy preacher of gospel truth. Indeed, some in Corinth had lost confidence in Paul because of the influence of false teachers in the congregation (again, see 2 Cor. 11). He longed for the entire congregation to come to **understand completely** not only the truthfulness of his message but also the sincere relationship that he and the Corinthians shared.

The term translated **pride** is the same noun rendered "boast" in verse 12. Paul longed for the Corinthians to have confidence—righteous boasting—in their relationship with him as the one who had first brought the gospel to them and then helped them mature in the faith. Furthermore, Paul already beamed with what we might term fatherly pride in the Corinthians.

This fatherly pride was not fleeting with Paul. He mentioned to them that he planned to brag about the relationship they had—again, not in any arrogant or negative way—in **the day of our Lord Jesus**. When the Lord returned as the Judge, the apostle looked forward to expressing to the Lord his pride in the Corinthians. He hoped that they, in turn, would have reason to be proud of him on the day of judgment. He expressed a similar expectation when he wrote to the Christians in Thessalonica (1 Thess. 2:19-20). By extension, believers today have every right to look forward to the day of the Lord as a time to bring before the Lord the results of their gospel ministry to others.

**Can you think of another believer, perhaps one whom you had not really understood or appreciated, in whom you now see God at work in and through? What have you done (or what do you need to do) to accept that person as your co-laborer in the gospel? Who do you look forward to righteously boasting about before the Lord when you face Him in judgment?**

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## 2 CORINTHIANS 1:13-14

<sup>13</sup> For we are writing nothing to you other than what you can read and also understand. I hope you will understand completely — <sup>14</sup> 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.

# LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

## FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

**WELCOME:** Create two signs that say “Comfort Zone” and “Out of Comfort Zone.” Place both signs on a focal wall. As the group arrives, ask the following questions and record responses on the appropriate signs: *What kinds of situations would you consider to be in your “comfort zone”?* (PSG, p. 82) *What things have you recently attempted that were “outside your comfort zone”?* *What are the advantages of staying in your comfort zone and of going outside your comfort zone?* (PSG, p. 82)

**SAY:** *The apostle Paul undeniably lived outside his comfort zone as a traveling church planter. As we’ll see in this week’s session, he needed comfort and praised God for the comfort that came from both God and others.*

**PRESENT:** Distribute **Pack Item 2** (*Outline: 1,2 Corinthians*) and point out that this week’s session begins a study of 2 Corinthians. Use the third paragraph in Understand the Context (PSG, p. 83) to help set the context for 2 Corinthians. Distribute **Pack Item 7** (*Handout: Corinthians Time Line*), and briefly review the events under AD 50–57, the time of Paul’s writing of 2 Corinthians.

**TRANSITION:** *Paul’s love and concern for the Corinthians are evident in this letter. This study explores his desire for them to know God’s comfort in order to endure suffering.*

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

**EXPLAIN:** Note that Paul had been delayed in visiting the Corinthian church because of sufferings he faced that benefited them and honored God.

**READ:** As you read aloud 2 Corinthians 1:3-7, encourage the group to listen for Paul’s attitude toward sufferings and difficulties.

**GUIDE:** Lead the group to review the list of Paul’s afflictions on page 85 of the PSG.

**DISCUSS:** *How does a person’s attitude when facing suffering influence others? To what examples can you point to illustrate your response?* (PSG, p. 86)

**GUIDE:** Lead the group to locate in verses 5-7 two reasons that Paul said the affliction and comfort in his life would be useful for the Corinthians’ comfort.

**DISCUSS:** *How might the sufferings of a believer be used by God to impact the lives of others?* (PSG, p. 86)

**MEMORIZE:** Distribute **Pack Item 13** (*Handout: Memory Verses Bookmark*). Encourage the group to memorize 2 Corinthians 1:4 as a way of remembering that believers can be comforted when facing sufferings because God is present and using those experiences to impact others.

**TRANSITION:** *God’s purposes for trials in the lives of His children are for a reason. Paul listed situations that highlighted his weakness as a human in contrast with God’s power as demonstrated through the gospel.*

**READ:** Direct the group to read 2 Corinthians 1:8-11, underlining the words Paul used to describe his emotions.

**DISCUSS:** *What situations might cause a person to feel completely overwhelmed? What positives can come from those situations?*

**SAY:** *Paul passed a test of faith, growing as a result of what he faced in Asia. Believers can celebrate a testing of their faith, knowing that God will strengthen them and demonstrate His power.*

**SHARE:** Write on the board: *Not trust in \_\_\_\_\_ but in \_\_\_\_\_*. Ask a volunteer to search verse 9 and fill in the blanks (*ourselves, God*). Lead group members to consider times they have learned to trust in God rather than themselves. Invite volunteers to share brief testimonies.

**READ:** Invite a volunteer to read aloud 2 Corinthians 1:12-14, while the group listens for actions that point to Paul's integrity.

**EXPLAIN:** *Paul called for the Corinthian believers to accept him as a proven apostle, even though he had been delayed in his visit. His integrity seemed to have been at stake. Even though Paul had poured his life into this church, they still only partially understood him and his ministry among them.*

**DISCUSS:** *What is the relationship between a person's integrity and our willingness to recognize or accept their role in kingdom work? What would be a greater source of pride—being a person of integrity or being recognized by others for the work you do? Explain.* (PSG, p. 89)

**DIRECT:** Refer back to verse 14 and say: *Paul wasn't boasting in himself or his own human wisdom. Rather, he admitted that anything good and praiseworthy is because of God's grace.* Invite a volunteer to read aloud 1 Corinthians 15:10.

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## SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

**REVIEW:** Lead in a review of the bulleted statements under In My Context (PSG, p. 90). Invite volunteers to select the statement that best describes the insight they most need to take to heart. Encourage them to share what they selected with another person in the group.

**PLAN:** Call attention to the first question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 90): *Discuss with your group ways God is encouraging your group members through someone who is suffering and the way they are facing that suffering. What can your group do to be encouragers to others?*

**PRAY:** Lead in a time of silent prayer, during which you read aloud the second and third question sets under In My Context (PSG, p. 90). Invite the group to prayerfully consider their responses.



## PRACTICE

- Make it a priority to read through the entire Book of 2 Corinthians this week to gain a deeper understanding of the context for upcoming sessions.
- Contact the group during the week, reminding them to be encouragers to those who are facing suffering.
- Pray for those who are suffering, asking that they will experience God's comfort. Ask God to use you in comforting and encouraging others.

## MORE IDEAS

### FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

To supplement the Focus Attention activity, before the session, invite two people to conduct a debate in front of the group. Ask one person to debate the advantages of staying in your comfort zone, and the second, the advantages of going outside your comfort zone.

### EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To enhance the discussion of 2 Corinthians 1:3-7, invite volunteers to read the passage from various Bible translations. Lead in a discussion of how God's presence can help people experience comfort in the midst of difficult circumstances.
- To supplement the discussion of 2 Corinthians 1:8-11, focus on hope as expressed in this passage. Invite a volunteer to read or summarize the second paragraph under Verses 10-11 (PSG, p. 87). Discuss: *Why is hope such a powerful thing? How is the hope described by Paul different from wishful thinking?* (PSG, p. 88)
- To provide additional insight into 2 Corinthians 1:12-14, say: *Believers can recognize the work of God in and through others, accepting them as co-laborers.* Spend time as a group identifying and praying for co-laborers. Begin with your group, then move outward to your church, your community, your country, and the world.

### SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Use **Pack Item 1** (*Map: Paul's Second Missionary Journey*) and a Bible dictionary to complete the Bible Skill activity (PSG, p. 86). Locate Corinth, Ephesus, and the provinces of Asia and Macedonia on the map, and then: *Use a Bible dictionary to learn more about these places during the time of Paul. How do these places enter into an understanding of the background of 2 Corinthians? What motivated Paul to continue to plant churches in these areas knowing the difficulty he would face?*

### SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

Read the lyrics to "God of Comfort," by Tim Hughes, or play a recording of the song. Lead the group to think of a place in which they especially need God's comfort.

# DISPLAYING THE GOSPEL

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

## 2 CORINTHIANS 4:5-18

**MEMORY VERSE: 2 CORINTHIANS 5:9**

- **READ** 2 Corinthians 2:14–5:10, First Thoughts (p. 104), and Understand the Context (pp. 104–105). As you read, notice the word pictures Paul used in his letter to contrast human suffering and despair with God’s power and hope.
- **STUDY** 2 Corinthians 4:5-18, using Explore the Text (pp. 105–109). As you study, look for words or phrases that reveal Paul’s priorities in his life. Reflect on how these priorities impacted the way he approached life.
- **PLAN** the group time using ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 110–111) and More Ideas (p. 112). Refer to [Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible/Adults/LeaderExtras](http://Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible/Adults/LeaderExtras) for more ways to grow as a leader.
- **GROW** with other group leaders at the Groups Ministry blog ([LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry](http://LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry)).
- **GATHER** the following items:  Personal Study Guides. Make copies of:  **PACK ITEM 11** (*Handout: Key Idols in Corinth*). Prepare to display:  **PACK ITEM 5** (*Map: Center of Ancient Corinth*). For More Ideas (p. 112):  Sheets of paper and pens or pencils;  A Bible dictionary or commentary.



## KEY DOCTRINE

### *God's Purpose of Grace*

Those whom God has accepted in Christ, and sanctified by His Spirit, will never fall away from the state of grace, but shall persevere to the end.

## BIBLE SKILL

*Observe when and for what purpose a New Testament passage included Old Testament quotations.*

Paul quoted Genesis 1:3 in 2 Corinthians 4:6 and Psalm 116:10 in 2 Corinthians 4:13. Read the entire Old Testament chapter for each quotation. How does the context of the verse quoted help you better understand why Paul quoted that passage? What factors are the same or similar? How do the quoted passages help you better understand Jesus and the gospel?

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# FIRST THOUGHTS

LifeWay Research surveyed Americans about their perceptions regarding religious liberty. Sixty percent of those surveyed agreed with the statement, "Religious liberty is on the decline in America." Almost two-thirds (63%) agreed with the statement, "American Christians face growing intolerance." Religious liberty has become an increasingly contentious issue in American culture.

(In PSG, p. 91) **Do you agree or disagree that religious liberty is declining? Explain your answer. What actions should be taken in places where Christianity is actively persecuted or suppressed?**

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Christianity was not tolerated as a legal religion anywhere in the Roman Empire of the first century. Thus, when Paul and other apostles wrote to encourage believers who faced persecution, they were dealing with a much more challenging cultural situation than any of us has faced.

Paul had no expectations of being free from cultural or political pressure. In fact, he expected it. The same LifeWay survey revealed that 43% think that Christians complain too much about how they are treated. Paul didn't complain. Instead, he focused on how God was shaping and using him to spread the gospel in any situation. As we study 2 Corinthians 4, look for ways Christians can display the gospel, no matter our personal circumstances and no matter what cultural or political environment we live in. Will we, like Paul, be confident that, if we proclaim Jesus as the Christ—whatever our weaknesses or life situation—the power of the gospel will be revealed?

# UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

## 2 CORINTHIANS 2:14–5:10

We identified briefly the first major section of the body of 2 Corinthians in last week's Understand the Context (pp. 94-95). As you may recall, in part one of the epistle Paul provided the believers with an expanded account of his ministry (1:12–7:16). His purpose was largely to defend himself against the charge that his apostleship was somehow a fraud. We may broadly organize his comments in this part of the letter under three headings:

- *Paul's itinerary (1:12–2:13)*. We considered part of this in last week's focal text.
- *Paul's message (2:14–5:10)*. This is the broader text from which this week's lesson is drawn.
- *Paul's purpose (5:11–7:16)*. This is the broader text from which next week's study is taken.

Paul masterfully described his message—the context passage for this week’s lesson—in several ways. The following points summarize what the apostle emphasized in the “message” section of his letter:

- *Paul had a ministry resulting in life or death (2:14-17).*
- *The Corinthians were Paul’s living letters (3:1-3).*
- *Paul’s competence came from God, not himself (3:4-6).*
- *Paul’s message focused on the new covenant (3:7-8).*
- *The light of the gospel shined in Paul’s message (4:1-6).*
- *The gospel is like treasure hidden in clay jars (4:7-18).*
- *Believers face a wonderful future after bodily death (5:1-10).*

Our verses for this week’s lesson are drawn from two of these sections, both of which provide powerful images for us as we seek to live out the gospel today. First is the image of light shining out of darkness. Second is the picture of a fantastic treasure hidden in a clay pot. As you investigate these verses, look for ways that you can apply Paul’s teaching to your life. Are you ready to be a channel of light shining in the darkness? Can you think of yourself as a plain clay pot, in which Christ and the gospel are a precious treasure? Will you face life with confidence, believing that the power of the gospel will be revealed?

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

### PROCLAIM (2 COR. 4:5-6)

#### VERSE 5

In 2 Corinthians 4:3-4, Paul acknowledged that many persons he preached to had refused the gospel and were perishing. Their minds had been blinded and the devil had done his work. But might it have been the case that persons refused Christ because somehow Paul’s message was defective? Could he have had some kind of self-centered agenda and distorted the gospel? He strenuously refuted this idea in verse 5. He was not preaching his own opinions or drawing attention to himself.

The apostle’s message instead centered on ***Jesus Christ as Lord***. *Jesus* refers to the historical person who lived, was crucified, and rose from the dead. *Christ* means “Messiah,” the fulfillment of biblical prophecy about a coming King. *Lord* means that He is supreme—not Caesar or some object of religious worship.

Those who acknowledge Jesus in this way have bowed to His lordship. They have become His servants, loyal, and obedient. Paul noted that he had been called to serve the Corinthians ***for Jesus’s sake***. He was first of all Jesus’ servant; he would therefore serve others if that was his Master’s bidding. His ministry was not primarily for their sake but for Christ’s.

### BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read “‘Righteousness’ in Paul’s Writings” in the Spring 2018 issue of Biblical Illustrator. Available at [LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator](http://LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator).

### 2 CORINTHIANS 4:5

<sup>5</sup> For we are not proclaiming ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’s sake.

## 2 CORINTHIANS 4:6

<sup>6</sup>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.

### VERSE 6

Paul preached Jesus rather than himself because he had become a new creation. He compared what had happened to him spiritually to what had happened when God created the heavens and the earth. He recalled that God’s creative work began by calling forth the light: “**Let light shine out of darkness**” (a paraphrase of Gen. 1:3). In like manner, God called forth the light of the gospel into Paul’s spiritual darkness: **God ... has shone in our hearts**. Paul was perhaps remembering his dramatic experience with the light that flashed around him at his conversion. That light physically blinded Paul for a few days (Acts 22:6-11).

The apostle described his spiritual transformation as receiving **the light of the knowledge of God’s glory**. (Paul likely knew that Jesus had called Himself the light of the world; John 8:12; 9:5.) In the gospel, Paul had received revelation about the true nature of God’s glory—His greatness and worthiness to be praised. The original creation displayed a measure of God’s glory. His works as described throughout the Old Testament showed His splendor. But the fullest display of the glory of God is found in one place: **the face of Jesus Christ**. Only when people embrace the Person and presence of Jesus do they begin to experience the life-changing glory of God.

Paul’s experience was not unique. The same thing happens every time a person—previously spiritually blind—responds to gospel proclamation with repentance and faith. Paul declared this inclusivity a few verses later: “Therefore, 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).

**What do you think of Paul’s comparing the original creation of light to the light God sends into someone’s life at conversion? How does this teaching support Paul’s insistence on proclaiming Jesus instead of himself? What does it mean for believers today to proclaim Jesus exclusively?**

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## 2 CORINTHIANS 4:7

<sup>7</sup>Now we have this treasure in clay jars, so that this extraordinary power may be from God and not from us.

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

Paul listed life situations that highlighted his weakness as a human, yet in contrast he overcame through God’s power, demonstrated through the gospel. True life is found only through faith in the resurrected Jesus.

### VERSE 7

On one hand, being transformed by Christ is like light shining in our hearts. On the other hand, receiving the gospel is like gaining an enormous treasure. Jesus Himself had compared God’s kingdom to a priceless pearl (Matt. 13:45-46). Paul developed the analogy, however, by likening himself (and other believers) to **clay jars**. Earthenware vessels were common in Paul’s day, and it wasn’t unknown for jewels or other expensive items to be hidden from view in ordinary pottery. We do similar things today,

such as a grandmother's habit of hiding cash in a shoebox along with the other shoeboxes in the top of her closet.

In Paul's illustration, however, the point was not to keep the treasure hidden, but rather to contrast the value of the gospel with the frailty of the gospel messengers. God has seen to it that mere humans, with physical bodies subject to sickness and lives fraught with trouble, were His instruments. He did this so that the instruments might not be praised for their greatness, cleverness, and power, but that all will recognize God as the source of this extraordinary power. Although believers are God's chosen instruments, we are nevertheless instruments of clay (see Acts 9:15).

#### VERSES 8-9

To demonstrate the difference between the clay pots (frail human preachers) and the treasure (the powerful gospel), Paul noted the hardships he had endured. He used four contrasting pairs, with the first element describing his human weakness and the second element showing that the treasure had been preserved through God's sustaining power. They demonstrate the paradox of living as followers of Jesus in this present evil age:

Clay jar (Paul; believers)	Treasure (Powerful Gospel)
<i>Afflicted in every way</i>	<i>Not crushed</i>
<i>Perplexed</i>	<i>Not in despair</i>
<i>Persecuted</i>	<i>Not abandoned</i>
<i>Struck down</i>	<i>Not destroyed</i>

The apostle did not specify the particular situations of his personal trials. The Book of Acts provides examples. Nor did he give specifics of how God had sustained him. Yet he had always found God sufficient for his needs. Throughout the centuries, believers have taken courage from Paul's example as they have gone through the same kinds of difficulties.

#### VERSES 10-12

Paul saw himself as following the pattern Jesus demonstrated in His dying and living. Three times in verses 10-12 the apostle noted his constant experience of death: ***We always carry the death of Jesus ... are always given over to death ... death is at work in us.*** Clearly Paul was constantly aware of Jesus' suffering and death on the cross. If his Lord had been given over to death, then it was no surprise for His followers to endure sufferings repeatedly.

Paul was constantly mindful of the death of Jesus as it impacted him. He was equally aware of Jesus' resurrection to life. Paul also experienced the resurrection life of Jesus throughout his ministry (even as he waited for his own final resurrection). Thus, three times in this passage he noted his understanding of this kind of life: ***the life of Jesus may also be displayed in our body ... so that Jesus's life may also be displayed ... but life works in you.*** Not only in this life but also in the resurrection, Paul was characterized by the life of the living Lord Jesus. Further, the Corinthians had also begun to experience this life as well. Clearly the death and the resurrection life of Jesus go hand in hand.

#### 2 CORINTHIANS 4:8-9

<sup>8</sup> We are afflicted in every way but not crushed; we are perplexed but not in despair; <sup>9</sup> we are persecuted but not abandoned; we are struck down but not destroyed.

#### 2 CORINTHIANS 4:10-12

<sup>10</sup> We always carry the death of Jesus in our body, so that the life of Jesus may also be displayed in our body.

<sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> So then, death is at work in us, but life in you.

## 2 CORINTHIANS 4:13-14

<sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> For we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you.

## 2 CORINTHIANS 4:15

<sup>15</sup> 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.

### VERSES 13-14

Paul had just written about himself in contrasting terms: clay jar versus treasure; death versus life. This reminded him of something written in the Psalms. He quoted a line from Psalm 116:10: ***I believed, therefore I spoke.*** When we read the entire Psalm, we recognize that it recounts affliction and suffering yet also rescue and thanksgiving for deliverance. The psalmist, like Paul, experienced both death and life. He too focused on God. Thus, Paul claimed to have the same spirit of faith as the psalmist, because both trusted in God. Further, just as the psalmist believed in God and then spoke about his troubles in his composition, so it was with the apostle: ***we also believe, and therefore speak.***

In verse 14 the apostle's thoughts turned to confidence about his future life in the presence of the Lord forever. How could he be sure of this? Because ***the one who raised the Lord Jesus*** had promised to do so. Those who are united with Jesus in His death are also united to Him in His resurrection (Eph. 4:2-7). Thus, Paul was certain of his coming resurrection. He was equally certain of the Corinthians' future resurrection. Together, Paul and the Corinthians—***us with you***—will be raised. By extension, all believers—everyone joined to Christ by faith—may be confident of their future resurrection.

**It was more important for others to come to faith in Christ than for Paul to experience a comfortable life.**

### VERSE 15

Everything Paul had just written about—his sufferings, his experience of death yet life, his confidence in his future blessedness—was not about him in isolation from others. Indeed, ***everything is for your benefit.*** He served the Lord for reasons outside himself. First, he thought horizontally: through his ministry more and more people experienced God's grace through the gospel. It was more important for others to come to faith in Christ than for Paul to experience a comfortable life. Second, he thought vertically. His ultimate purpose in life was to glorify God. Thus, when more people were saved, this would cause thanksgiving to increase in their prayers, which in turn displayed God's glory. Paul understood that God's purpose for his life and ministry was to manifest the glory of God.

(In PSG, p. 96) **How would Paul define a win for himself? For other believers? How should believers understand success in this life?**

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

### VERSES 16-18

Paul had written of God's power demonstrated through him despite frailty and suffering; he had also noted his hope in the resurrection. For these reasons, ***we do not give up***. Paul kept on following the Lord's calling on his life, as difficult as this had been and would continue to be. He acknowledged the physical toll: ***our outer person is being destroyed***. As one of the "clay jars" with "mortal flesh" (4:7,11), he was moving toward bodily death. Both his human mortality and his Christian sufferings were included in his thought.

Yet these things were not worth comparing with the glorious spiritual reality that Paul already enjoyed— ***our inner person is being renewed day by day***. Already his true self, his spirit, had the daily delight of new life because of Christ's life. All believers, along with Paul, have received the indwelling Spirit as the down payment of their inheritance (see Eph. 1:14). Spiritual blessings are ours already, but we have not yet received full salvation. Only when we receive our resurrection bodies at Christ's return will we fully reach the endpoint of day-by-day renewal.

Paul was further strengthened in his daily struggles by giving them an assessment from the perspective of heaven. They were merely a ***momentary light affliction***. This no-big-deal evaluation contrasted with his assessment of his struggles from an earthly perspective, which he had noted in 4:8-9. He judged them as insignificant when measured by the absolutely incomparable ***eternal weight of glory*** waiting for him.

Theological facts are fine as far as they go. But they do not help us until we act on them. Paul determined to ***focus on*** invisible realities (***what is unseen***) rather than what is visible. In this instance, the apostle was not contrasting physical realities and spiritual realities. He meant to distinguish between his present sufferings and the future experience of full salvation at Christ's return. This salvation will include both physical and spiritual realities. Future salvation is invisible because it has not yet arrived.

Paul further explained the value of his chosen focus. If he had paid attention to the visible, he would have been looking at things that are ***temporary***. They will all disappear when Christ returns. By fixing his spiritual gaze on ***what is unseen***—everything that believers will enjoy after the resurrection of the body—Paul kept the eternal before him. The future blessedness of believers will never end.

(In PSG, p. 98) **How does the glory reserved for us in the future serve as motivation in the now to be faithful and courageous in suffering?**

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### 2 CORINTHIANS 4:16-18

<sup>16</sup> Therefore we do not give up. Even though our outer person is being destroyed, our inner person is being renewed day by day.

<sup>17</sup> For our momentary light affliction is producing for us an absolutely incomparable eternal weight of glory.

<sup>18</sup> 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.

# LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

## FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

**GUIDE:** As the group arrives, share information from the LifeWay Research survey in the first and third paragraphs under First Thoughts (p. 104).

**DISCUSS:** *Do you agree or disagree that religious liberty is declining? Explain your answer. What actions should be taken in places where Christianity is actively persecuted or suppressed?* (PSG, p. 91)

**EXPLAIN:** Christianity was not tolerated as a legal religion anywhere in the Roman Empire of the first century. Direct attention to **Pack Item 11** (*Handout: Key Idols in Corinth*) to provide background on Paul's environment. Locate the different temples to the gods in the city (listed on the handout) on **Pack Item 5** (*Map: Center of Ancient Corinth*).

**TRANSITION:** *When Paul wrote to encourage believers who faced persecution, he was dealing with a much more challenging cultural situation than most of us have faced. Amid these challenges, Paul focused on how God was shaping him and using him to share the gospel.*

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

**READ:** As you read aloud 2 Corinthians 4:5-6, ask the group to listen for words that describe what Paul was and was not proclaiming.

**GUIDE:** Lead the group to distinguish between what Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy were proclaiming and what these apostles were promoting. Use the comments under Verse 5 in the PSG (p. 93) as needed.

**DISCUSS:** *How were Paul's actions different from other teachers in Corinth? From the PSG (p. 94): What are the implications and consequences for proclaiming someone or something other than salvation in Christ alone?*

**MINI-LECTURE:** Use the comments under Verse 6 (PSG, pp. 93–94) to give a mini-lecture about God's illuminating work in our hearts. Refer to Exodus 34:29-35; 2 Corinthians 3:7-13; and Hebrews 1:3. Emphasize that Paul said God's glory isn't merely *on* Jesus' face but is *in* His face. Say: *Moses' face was veiled, but Jesus' face is shining brightly to overcome the darkness in our hearts. Christ alone is the one to proclaim!*

**ASK:** *What are the implications and consequences for proclaiming someone or something other than salvation in Christ alone?* (PSG, p. 94)

**READ:** Invite a volunteer to read aloud 2 Corinthians 4:7-15, as the group listens for ways Paul contrasted human weakness with God's power.

**EXPLAIN:** Direct attention to Verse 7. Explain that "treasure" is valuable and costly, while "clay jars" are weak and common. The weakness of the vessel (clay jar) allows God's extraordinary power to be shown and for others to realize the power came from God and not from us.

**GUIDE:** Read Verses 8-9 responsively. Read, or enlist someone to read, the phrases that begin with *We are \_\_\_\_\_*, (stopping before the word *but*) and instruct the rest of the group to complete the phrase by reading *but not \_\_\_\_\_*.

**APPLY:** Lead group members to reflect on the challenges or difficulties they are facing. Instruct them to write in the margin of their PSGs *I am \_\_\_\_\_*, briefly describing their situation in the blank. Then suggest that they complete the rest of the phrase (*but not \_\_\_\_\_*) by writing words that reflect God's power.

**DISCUSS:** *How might the threat of death impact a person's faith? How can potential persecution strengthen a believer's resolve to take a stand for Christ?*

**TRANSITION:** *Paul didn't dwell on death, but instead magnified life.*

**GUIDE:** Review the last paragraph under Verses 8-14 (PSG, p. 96) and the comments under Verse 15 (PSG, p. 96) for guidance in living victoriously in Christ, even in situations that threaten to destroy us. Invite a volunteer to read 1 Thessalonians 5:18.

**DISCUSS:** *How would Paul define a win for himself? For other believers? How should believers understand success in this life?* (PSG, p. 96)

**READ:** Invite a volunteer to read aloud 2 Corinthians 4:16-18, as the others listen to the way Paul contrasted life on earth with eternal life in heaven.

**ASK:** *How does the inner person get renewed daily? How does that daily renewal fuel and motivate the believer?* (PSG, p. 97)

**SAY:** *Paul challenged the Corinthian believers to focus on the unseen and the eternal. He reminded them that doing so would produce an incomparable reward in heaven.*

**GUIDE:** Lead the group to locate the information on "eternal glory" under Verses 17-18 (PSG, pp. 97-98). Discuss: *How does the glory reserved for us in the future serve as motivation in the now to be faithful and courageous in suffering?* (PSG, p. 98)

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## **SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)**

**GUIDE:** Read the bulleted statements under In My Context (PSG, p. 99). Invite the group to propose additional insights that could be added to the list.

**CHALLENGE:** Encourage the group to consider their responses to the first question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 99): *What actions do you need to take to safeguard against proclaiming anyone other than Jesus? Discuss with the group ways you can hold each other accountable for making Jesus the focus of our message.* Lead the group to brainstorm potential actions they can take individually and as a group.

**PRAY:** Before closing in prayer, read the Key Doctrine statement (PSG, p. 96). Pray, thanking God for His grace through which believers can face life with confidence.



## PRACTICE

- Pray for each member of your group by name, asking God to help him or her face life with confidence and display the gospel in challenging situations.
- Take time this week to connect with the group, encouraging them to come to the next session. Make sure to communicate which session to study with those who missed the group meeting.
- Look at ways of arranging the group in a different way and using a different focal wall.

## MORE IDEAS

### FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

To supplement the Focus Attention activity, survey the group about religious liberty. Prior to the group's arrival, write on the board: (1) *Religious Liberty is on the decline in America.* (2) *American Christians face growing intolerance.* As the group enters, distribute sheets of paper and pens or pencils. Ask individuals to write "yes" or "no" to the questions on the board. Collect the papers, and enlist a volunteer to tabulate results while you share information from the LifeWay Research Survey from First Thoughts (p. 104). When results from your group have been compiled, compare them with the LifeWay survey.

### EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To supplement the discussion of 2 Corinthians 4:5-6, turn off the lights in the room. Lead participants to recall the last time they experienced a power failure and the lights went out. Invite volunteers to share experiences. Assure them that no matter how dark their situation seems, God's light is eternal. Turn on the lights.
- To enhance the discussion of 2 Corinthians 4:7-15, use a Bible dictionary or commentary to present a mini-lecture on clay jars. Ask: *What other comparisons would you make for the temporary nature of the human body?* Refer to 2 Corinthians 5:1-4, where Paul described our physical bodies as "earthly."
- To enhance the study of 2 Corinthians 4:16-18, invite volunteers to read the passage from a variety of translations. Then form small teams and invite them to re-state the passage in their own words.

### SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Lead the group to complete the Bible Skill on page 94 of the PSG. Form two teams, and ask one team to respond to the questions based on Genesis 1:3 in 2 Corinthians 4:6 and the second team to respond to the questions based on Psalm 116:10 in 2 Corinthians 4:13. Invite volunteers to share responses with the large group.

### SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

Invite a volunteer to re-read 2 Corinthians 4:16. Close by singing or playing a recording of "We'll Understand It Better By and By," by Charles Tindley.

# BECOMING NEW

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

## 2 CORINTHIANS 5:16-21; 6:1-2

**MEMORY VERSE: 2 CORINTHIANS 5:21**

- **READ** 2 Corinthians 5:11:16-21;6:1-2, First Thoughts (p. 114), and Understand the Context (pp. 114–115). Notice the way Paul described how believers are made new in Christ.
- **STUDY** 2 Corinthians 5:16-21;6:1-2, using Explore the Text on pages 115–119. Look for words and phrases Paul used to describe the results of salvation. How do the words or phrases work together in Paul's description?
- **PLAN** the group time using ideas under Lead Group Bible Study on pages 120–121 and More Ideas on page 122, in *QuickSource*, and on [Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible/Adults/LeaderExtras](http://Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible/Adults/LeaderExtras). Consider using at least one of the More Ideas (p. 122) during this week's group time.
- **GROW** from expert insights on weekly studies through the Ministry Grid ([MinistryGrid.com/Web/ExploretheBible](http://MinistryGrid.com/Web/ExploretheBible)).
- **GATHER** the following items:  Personal Study Guides. Make copies of:  **PACK ITEM 13** (*Handout: Memory Verses Bookmark*) as needed. Prepare to display the following Pack Item:  **PACK ITEM 3** (*Key Verse: 2 Corinthians 5:20*). For More Ideas (p. 122):  A computer or smartphone to show Jason Gray's video "I Am New"; and  Blank paper and markers.



## KEY DOCTRINE

### *Salvation*

Regeneration, or the new birth, is a work of God's grace whereby believers become new creatures in Christ Jesus.

## BIBLE SKILL

*Notice repeated words or phrases in a Bible passage.*

Biblical writers sometimes used repetition of key words to emphasize a theme or message. Paul used word repetition in this session's passage. Identify the term (verb and noun) he used five times in 2 Corinthians 5:18-21. Think about what this repetition helps communicate in the overall passage. Look also at the other times the apostle used forms of this term in his letters (Rom. 5:10-11; 11:15; Eph. 2:16; Col. 1:20-22). What significance does this repeated term have for believers today?

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# FIRST THOUGHTS

Humans are relational by nature. Some of the greatest joys in life are found in healthy relationships. On the other hand, a broken or lost relationship can send us into depression or desperation. The closer the relationship, the greater the hurt if broken.

(In PSG, p. 100) **Can any broken relationship be fixed? Explain. How does the restoring of a once broken relationship change the people who were once at odds with each other?**

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God created us to relate to one another, but He also created us to relate to Him. Our greatest need is to be reconciled to God. Sin has created a barrier that must be dealt with if we are to come into a right relationship with Him. Sin also creates barriers between people, and barriers must be removed if two sides are to come into agreement. In this week's Scripture passage, we'll see that Paul thought deeply about reconciliation and insisted that genuine reconciliation comes only through a right relationship with Jesus. Further, as you study this passage, keep in mind that churches that reconcile fractured relationships will be more effective in proclaiming the gospel message.

# UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

## 2 CORINTHIANS 5:11–7:16

If you have been following these studies in 1 and 2 Corinthians, you may recall several factors that likely contributed to Paul's focus on reconciliation in this section of his letter. For instance, one issue Paul addressed was the problem of church division (1 Cor. 1:10–4:21). Competing cliques in the church needed to put aside their differences and be reconciled. Then, in 2 Corinthians, Paul addressed the difficulties between himself and certain people in the Corinthian church who had rejected his authority. Again, reconciliation was called for between Paul and the Corinthians.

Yet there was a greater need than horizontal restoration of relationships. Even more important was for the Corinthians to understand—and be certain that they had received—vertical reconciliation. Thus Paul, inspired by the Spirit, put into writing important truths about what it means to come into a right relationship with God. He embedded this teaching in the first major section of the body of the letter, dealing with his ministry (2 Cor. 1:12–7:16). As part of his teaching about the purpose of his ministry (5:11–7:16), he included teaching on reconciliation, the basis of this week's study.

We can follow the development of Paul's comments on the purpose of his ministry as follows:

- *The ministry of reconciliation* (5:16–6:2); the focal passage for this week's study.
- *The character of Paul's ministry* (6:3–13); a bold presentation of Paul's extensive difficulties.
- *Separation to God* (6:14–7:1); a challenge for believers to reject partnerships with evildoers.
- *Joy and repentance* (7:2–16); Paul's joy when he learned that the Corinthians had repented.

Our lesson concentrates on the verses in the first of these headings. As we consider the passage together, be on the lookout for the way Paul developed the following principle: Believers faithfully represent Christ by living as new creations reconciled to him.

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

### REBORN (2 COR. 5:16-17)

#### VERSE 16

In the preceding verses, the apostle described the meaning of Christ's death ("he died for all," 5:15) and the difference His death makes for those who have accepted His death in their place (they "no longer live for themselves," v. 15). Further, in Paul's own case, "the love of Christ compels us" (v. 14). Paul was impelled by Christ's love for him, proven by His loving sacrifice.

This interpretation of the meaning of Christ's death changed Paul's perspective. First, salvation altered his view of others. He framed this change using a phrase that he did not use anywhere else in his letters, stating that he now did not look at others **from a worldly perspective**. In this phrase, he meant the typical way people think of each other; that is, according to appearances and according to the worldly prejudices by which people evaluate others as if bodily existence is all that really matters. **From now on** means from the time that his understanding of the meaning of Christ's death had changed at his conversion. Paul now had a new, eternal perspective on people. He saw them as a new creation, as he noted in the next verse.

Paul explained that at one time he had also looked at Christ in a purely human way. Thus, according to appearances and the way Paul's own culture evaluated Jesus, He was a false messiah who died under God's curse (Deut. 21:23; Gal. 3:13). After Paul understood that Jesus rose again and now lived eternally as Lord and Savior, however, he no longer looked at Jesus as he once did. No doubt the apostle was encouraging his readers to be sure that their evaluation of Christ and of all human beings was based not on a typical, worldly standard but by God's eternal, heavenly standard.

### BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read "Reconciliation: The Heart of Second Corinthians" and "'Righteousness' in Paul's Writings" in the Spring 2018 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Available at [LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator](http://LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator).

### 2 CORINTHIANS 5:16

<sup>16</sup> 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.

## 2 CORINTHIANS 5:17

<sup>17</sup> Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, and see, the new has come!

### VERSE 17

So what was this new, heavenly standard that Paul had as he looked at others? Those who have trusted in Christ are now **in Christ**, in a vital relationship with Him. This means that they are a new creation. They have begun the transformation process that will culminate at the resurrection at the end of the age. All persons in Christ are to recognize the dramatic change that has happened to them and to the entire company of the redeemed.

### When he looked at unbelievers, he saw them as persons in need of the Savior.

They no longer belong to the order of old things. They belong to the order in which new things have come already. In Ephesians 2:10, Paul expressed it this way: “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works.” This was also what the prophet Isaiah had foreseen: “Do not remember the past events, pay no attention to things of old. Look, I am about to do something new; even now it is coming” (Isa. 43:18-19). When Paul looked at believers, he saw them as new creations. When he looked at unbelievers, he saw them as persons in need of the Savior. This reality permeated his ministry.

(In PSG, p. 103) **What actions and characteristics point to a person being made new as a result of faith in Jesus?**

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## 2 CORINTHIANS 5:18

<sup>18</sup> Everything is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.

### VERSE 18

The apostle shifted his attention, moving from salvation in terms of new creation to presenting it in terms of reconciliation to God. **Everything** refers to the changes Paul had just described: new life and a changed perspective about Christ and others. God had taken the initiative in salvation, which means that He has reconciled us to Himself.

In verses 18-21, Paul used a verb form or a noun form of “reconcile” five times. The original emphasis of this word was the establishment of harmony and peace between former enemies; hostilities had ceased; friendly relations now existed. The biblical teaching on salvation as reconciliation to God is unique to Paul (see also Rom. 5:10-11; 11:15; Eph. 2:16; Col. 1:20-22).

The apostle declared the basis of reconciliation: **through Christ**, which he explained more completely in verse 19. Essentially, our Lord had won him over, overcoming his former hostility against God. He also spoke about the consequence of reconciliation: God had given him a message which he was compelled to share as his **ministry**, a theme he developed further in verse 20. This ministry was how he served others. God had called him to live as an instrument of peacemaking between God and humans through the proclamation of the good news.

## VERSE 19

What does it mean that reconciliation between God and mankind came through Christ? Paul explained. God Himself brought reconciliation about, and this impacted all the world. Its impact was not limited to a particular group or to a particular time. Rather, once and for all God worked through Christ's death to remove the enmity between God and humanity. The hostility was caused by their trespasses. Our disobedience to God's law had resulted in our becoming God's enemies (Rom. 5:10). We could not just say, "I will no longer be God's enemy." Thus God Himself brought about the end of hostility by doing away with the cause of hostility. He resolved the problem of their **trespasses**, which Paul further explained in verse 21.

The point Paul made here, however, is that if the cause of enmity has been removed, then reconciliation is possible. Even though the entire world was in view in what Christ did on the cross, individuals have not automatically been made right with God. The apostle was not making a case for universalism, the notion that everyone will be saved. He was clear that **the message of reconciliation** had to be proclaimed. People must hear about what God has done through Christ and then respond in repentance and faith.

## VERSE 20

In verse 18, Paul had noted that God entrusted him with "the ministry of reconciliation." Here he explained further how this ministry worked on a day-to-day basis. Paul used plural forms ("we" and "us") throughout 2 Corinthians to refer essentially to himself (see comments on 2 Cor. 1:4, p. 96). We can assume, however, that in broad statements such as he made in this verse, he included the apostles as well as all others whom God has called to proclaim the gospel. By extension, this includes everyone who has received reconciliation with God. We too are His agents of reconciliation.

The phrase **we are ambassadors** translates a single word, a verb used elsewhere in the New Testament only in Ephesians 6:20: "I am an ambassador in chains." An ambassador was a representative of another. Ambassadors did not (and today, do not) speak on their own authority. They speak what they have been told to speak. Their own opinions do not matter. They do, however, speak with the authority of the one who sent them. Thus, Paul represented the kingdom of Christ to the peoples of the world. When he spoke, he was confident that God was **making his appeal through us**. *Appeal* is a form of a verb meaning "urge" or "beg" (Rom. 12:1; Eph. 4:1).

Just as ordinary ambassadors often have been involved in seeking reconciliation between warring nations, so Paul longed for persons to be reconciled, but in a greater way. The apostle was the mouthpiece of God. He used emotional language; the verb translated **we plead** meant "beg" or "ask," yet even more seriously than the verb translated "appeal." It could even refer to urging God to act ("pray," as in Matt. 9:38; 2 Cor. 8:4). Paul did not mean that he manipulated people, any more than we manipulate God when we pray; rather, he begged individuals to act for their own good. He was personally and emotionally engaged.

He summarized his message with this brief imperative: **"Be reconciled to God."** Three points should be noted. First, reconciliation initiated by God

## 2 CORINTHIANS 5:19

<sup>19</sup> 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.

## 2 CORINTHIANS 5:20

<sup>20</sup> Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us. We plead on Christ's behalf: "Be reconciled to God."

in Christ is not automatically extended. Second, Paul was not implying that the first readers were still unreconciled to God. He was describing for them his ministry. Third, those who hear the message must respond. They must repent and believe in order to be at peace with God.

## 2 CORINTHIANS 5:21

<sup>21</sup> 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.

## 2 CORINTHIANS 6:1-2

<sup>1</sup> Working together with him, we also appeal to you, “Don’t receive the grace of God in vain.” <sup>2</sup> 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!

### VERSE 21

Many Bible students consider this verse to be one of the most significant summaries in Scripture of the meaning of Christ’s death. Paul was explaining the connection between Jesus’ crucifixion and reconciliation with God. The statement is both profound and paradoxical.

- **He made.** The initiator of reconciliation was God Himself. He began the peace initiative.
- **The one who did not know sin.** Jesus was the sinless Son of God, yet also fully human.
- **To be sin.** Jesus did not actually become a sinner on the cross. Rather, Paul meant that Jesus became an offering for sin (see Num. 6:14; Isa. 53:4-5,10).
- **For us.** Paul was using the language of exchange or substitution. Jesus took our sins upon Himself. The Old Testament sacrificial system had prefigured this (Lev. 5:5-10).
- **So that ... we might become the righteousness of God.** Here is the other side of the exchange. Believing sinners receive more than forgiveness of sins. They receive righteousness as a gift from God. As Paul had written, they are a “new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17).
- **In him.** Reconciliation occurs only for those who have been joined to Jesus Christ by faith. The benefits of His death are applied not universally but to those who receive it in the way God has instituted (1 Cor. 1:30).

(In PSG, p. 106) **How does being reconciled to God qualify a person to be an ambassador for the reconciliation available to others? What responsibilities does an ambassador carry and how do those responsibilities inform believers of God’s expectations for them?**

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

#### VERSES 1-2

Paul ended this part of the epistle by showing the Corinthians the implications of his ambassadorship and the message he brought. Again, he reminded them that he and God were partners; they were co-laborers. He had already noted that God was appealing through him (5:20); now he used a form of the same verb that he had used in 5:20 to reflect urgency (*we ... appeal*).

To **receive the grace of God in vain** is to turn back from one's profession of trust in Christ. The apostle believed that genuine believers will not lose their salvation (Eph. 4:30; Phil. 1:6), but he was not persuaded that all the persons connected to the Corinthian congregation had truly come to Christ. It's essential for all who profess Christ to demonstrate that they possess Christ. If they falter and turn back from following Christ, their apparent receipt of the gospel will be shown to be empty. Pastors have sometimes expressed this truth with the catchy saying, "A faith that fizzles before the finish was faulty from the first."

## "A faith that fizzles before the finish was faulty from the first."

To strengthen his appeal, Paul referred to Isaiah 49:8 and applied the words of the prophet to his own time. In the original setting, the Lord was speaking. He was looking forward to the time beyond the captivity of Israel to a time of restoration. That time would be a wonderfully **acceptable time**. That time would be called **the day of salvation**. The words first had application to Isaiah's first hearers. It was meant to offer them hope of restoration after a time of judgment. As the verse in Isaiah continued, the Lord promised "to restore the land, to make them possess the desolate inheritances." It would all come to pass through the divine Servant, that is, the Messiah.

Paul believed that this time had already arrived with the coming of Jesus Christ. No longer was the acceptable time an unfulfilled promise. It had arrived **now**. Paul's first readers, the Corinthians, were to realize that the present moment was a special time of God's favor. They were already enjoying the time when divine blessing and favor had been poured out. The age to come, in many senses, had already arrived.

We are called on to realize that Paul's meaning extends to us as well. We are living in the era in which the Holy Spirit has been poured out, the new creation has arrived, and reconciliation with God is to be celebrated. This verse powerfully reminds us that the gospel is always to be presented with urgency. The time to act on God's offer of salvation is when we hear the message of reconciliation. The acceptable time may not always be present.

(In PSG, p. 107) **What are some reasons people may give for waiting to accept the gospel? What can a believer do to emphasize to others the urgency for accepting Christ?**

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# LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

## FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

**LIST:** As the group arrives, invite them to name occasions for which people send greeting cards. List the topics on the board (examples: birthday, Christmas, wedding, anniversary, graduation, birth, adoption, illness, death). Begin the session by asking volunteers to name the last greeting card they sent or received and the relationship it represented. Point out that humans are relational by nature. It seems that the closer the relationship, the greater the hurt if that relationship is broken.

**DISCUSS:** *Can any broken relationship be fixed? Explain. How does the restoring of a once broken relationship change the people who were once at odds with each other?* (PSG, p. 100)

**INTRODUCE:** Summarize the last paragraph under First Thoughts (p. 114) to explain the need for reconciliation between God and humanity.

**TRANSITION:** *In this study, we'll see that Paul thought deeply about reconciliation and insisted that genuine reconciliation comes only through a right relationship with Jesus.*

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

**READ:** As a volunteer reads aloud 2 Corinthians 5:16-17, encourage the group to listen for how Paul described the change in people that occurs through Christ.

**EMPHASIZE:** *Paul described the results of salvation in terms of being made new. Only through faith in Jesus can a person be made new and move away from what he or she once was.*

**SUMMARIZE:** Summarize the third paragraph under Verse 16 (PSG, pp. 102–103), which describes Paul's conversion.

**EXPLAIN:** *Being saved, or born again, means that believers are now considered to be in Christ. At the same time, Christ is said to be in believers. Being united with Christ involves both aspects, revealing a complementary relationship between our being in Christ and Him dwelling in us.*

**ASK:** *What are the benefits of being united with Christ? How does being united with Christ change how a person lives daily?* (PSG, p. 103)

**COMPARE:** Use information under Verse 17 (PSG, p. 103) to compare the old self with the new creation in Christ. Lead the group to read in unison 2 Corinthians 5:17.

**ASK:** *What actions and characteristics point to a person being made new as a result of faith in Jesus?* (PSG, p. 103)

**READ:** Direct the group to read 2 Corinthians 5:18-21 in their Bibles, looking for forms of the word *reconcile*.

**DEFINE:** Call on a volunteer to look up the definition of *reconcile* on an electronic device. Then share this definition from page 104 of the PSG: *Reconciliation is the restoration of a relationship that has been broken or severed; it is the reunion of parties separated by the consequences of sin or wrongdoing.* Point out that God initiated reconciliation with humanity, taking all the actions necessary for that reconciliation to happen.

**DISCUSS:** *How does being reconciled to God serve as motivation for serving Him? What does God's initiating this reconciliation reveal about God's love for humans? How should the love God demonstrates motivate us to serve Him?* (PSG, p. 105)

**GUIDE:** Search 2 Corinthians 5:20-21, and locate what God calls believers to do in light of His reconciliation.

**EMPHASIZE:** Draw attention to **Pack Item 3** (*Key Verse: 2 Corinthians 5:20*). Read the verse on the poster, and then say: *We are ambassadors for Christ—to share His message of reconciliation. Who better to entrust this message of reconciliation than to those who have tasted of it for themselves!*

**DISCUSS:** *How does being reconciled to God qualify a person to be an ambassador for the reconciliation available to others? What responsibilities does an ambassador carry and how do those responsibilities inform believers of God's expectations for them?* (PSG, p. 106)

**EXPLAIN:** *Two definitions for an ambassador include (1) the highest-ranking representative of the president or leader to a specific nation or international organization abroad, or (2) a messenger or representative who tells or reveals truth.*

**DISCUSS:** *How do these definitions help you understand God's expectations for believers?*

**READ:** Direct the group to listen for the way Paul emphasized the urgency of reconciliation as a volunteer reads aloud 2 Corinthians 6:1-2.

**ASK:** *What are some reasons people may give for waiting to accept the gospel?* (PSG, p. 107)

**CLARIFY:** *Paul reminded his hearers that the time to act on God's offer is when they hear the message. Stress that he did not imply that the Corinthians were in danger of losing their salvation.*

**GUIDE:** Lead the group to compare Isaiah 55:6-7 with 2 Corinthians 6:2, looking for references to readiness. Say: *The message of reconciliation with God is too important to overlook or push off for another time. Ask: What can a believer do to emphasize to others the urgency for accepting Christ?* (PSG, p. 107)

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## SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

**REVIEW:** Invite volunteers to share insights gained as you call out the three section titles for this study (Reborn, Reconciled, and Ready). Then read the bulleted statements under In My Context (PSG, p. 108).

**GUIDE:** Call attention to the second question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 108): *As a group, discuss how people seek to become reconciled with God on their own terms. What actions can your group take to help others know that reconciliation with God only comes through faith in Jesus?* Select one or two ideas for follow-up during the week.

**PRAY:** Use the third question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 108) as a prayer guide. Lead the group to list things God has provided. Close with a time of silence, leading them to reflect on someone with whom they need to make an urgent effort to share Jesus.



## PRACTICE

- Focus your mind on reconciliation. Do you need to seek reconciliation on a human level? How about in your church? Who do you feel led to approach about the need for reconciliation?
- Connect with the group this week, encouraging them to follow up on actions identified during Summarize and Challenge to help others know about reconciliation with God.
- Reflect on how you have been made new in Christ. Thank God for making a way to be reconciled to Him.

## MORE IDEAS

### FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

To replace or supplement the Focus Attention activity, provide blank paper and markers. Lead the group to draw a picture or symbol that represents a restored relationship. Invite volunteers to share their art and its interpretation.

### EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To supplement the discussion of 2 Corinthians 5:16-17, read aloud Acts 9:1-30, which describes Paul's conversion experience. Invite volunteers to describe their life before Christ (old things) and life in Christ (new things). As time allows, show the online video of Jason Gray's song, "I Am New."
- To enhance the study of 2 Corinthians 5:18-21, refer to the Bible Skill on page 106 of the PSG. Use the activity to help group members recognize how Paul used repetition to communicate his message.
- To enhance the conversation of 2 Corinthians 6:1-2, say: *I was going to talk about procrastination during this session, but I never got around to it.* Lead the group to brainstorm reasons people procrastinate. Discuss how these reasons can be overcome to emphasize the urgency of accepting Christ.

### SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Lead the group to reflect on the first question set to conclude the session (PSG, p. 108): *Take time to evaluate your life, looking for "old" things you still struggle to put off. Ask God to help you live in light of the new life He offers through His Son.* Read aloud 2 Corinthians 5:21, the memory verse for the week, and distribute copies of **Pack Item 13** (*Handout: Memory Verses Bookmark*) as needed.

### SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

To remind the group of Christ's sacrifice for believers' reconciliation, lead them to sing "Grace Greater than Our Sin," by Julia H. Johnston.

# GIVING FAITHFULLY

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

## 2 CORINTHIANS 9:1-15

**MEMORY VERSE: 2 CORINTHIANS 9:7**

- **READ** 1 Corinthians 8:1—9:15, First Thoughts (p. 124), and Understand the Context (pp. 124–125). Notice how Paul appealed to the Corinthians to complete the collection for ministry. What specific examples did he use to encourage giving? Consider how your church would respond if it received such an appeal.
- **STUDY** 1 Corinthians 9:1-15, using Explore the Text on pages 125–129. As you study, identify reasons for believers to meet the needs of others. Think about how the reasons relate to each other.
- **PLAN** the group time using ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 130–131), More Ideas (p. 132), ideas included in *QuickSource*, and ideas online at [Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible/Adults/LeaderExtras](http://Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible/Adults/LeaderExtras) to customize the plans according to the needs of your group. Consider ways to get everyone in the group involved in the study.
- **GROW** with other group leaders at the Groups Ministry blog ([LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry](http://LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry)).
- **GATHER** the following items:  Personal Study Guides. Make copies as needed of:  **PACK ITEM 8** (*Handout: Paul's List of Spiritual Gifts*). For More Ideas (p. 132):  Jars of pennies;  A Bible dictionary or commentary; and  A photo of a faucet.



## KEY DOCTRINE

### *Stewardship*

Christians should contribute of their means cheerfully, regularly, systematically, proportionately, and liberally for the advancement of the Redeemer's cause on earth.

## BIBLE SKILL

*Connect Old Testament teaching to New Testament significance.*

Read Psalm 112 and take note of the traits of the righteous person that the psalmist described. Then read 2 Corinthians 9 and observe how Paul applied the words of the psalm to Christians. How do the words of the psalm support what Paul wrote concerning generous giving?

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# FIRST THOUGHTS

The man wore everyday clothes with no designer names attached. Nothing about him indicated he was wealthy. He seemed to be just like any other customer sitting in the café. After eating his meal, he thanked the waitress and left her a tip that was larger than his bill. Another person at the table commented about his tip. The man reminded the person that one doesn't need to be rich to be generous, but that one simply must be generous to be generous.

(In PSG, p. 109) **Why might a person question someone being generous? What motivates people to be generous toward others?**

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The Bible includes many references to money and the wise use of money. Further, there are multiple examples of generous giving. The Israelites joyfully contributed the materials needed for building their tabernacle (Ex. 35:21-22). Jesus praised a widow who sacrificially donated two small coins (Luke 21:1-3). In the first church in Jerusalem, many believers sold houses and land and gave the proceeds to the apostles (Acts 4:34-35).

Sooner or later, believers are confronted with the matter of how to support kingdom causes. The Corinthian Christians faced just such an issue. Paul had asked in his first letter for them to participate in a financial collection. In this week's lesson, we'll see how he followed up with them. As you study, look for evidence that generous giving is an important way for believers to give evidence that they are trusting in God for all things.

# UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

## 2 CORINTHIANS 8:1-9:15

In the first major section of 2 Corinthians Paul wrote extensively about his ministry (2 Cor. 1:12-7:16). In last week's study we focused on what Paul said about reconciliation to God and how he had been entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation. The next section of the epistle, 2 Corinthians 8-9, is the longest passage in the New Testament dealing with the issue of Christian giving and generosity. The background to these chapters is as follows.

As apostle to the Gentiles and yet a Jew, Paul was especially sensitive to the issue of unity between these two racial groups within the churches. He fought hard for Gentile inclusion and rejected Jewish regulations (such as circumcision) for Gentile believers. One way, however, for Gentile Christians to show their appreciation for (and solidarity with) Jewish followers of Jesus was in the matter of financial support. There was a financial crisis among the Jerusalem Christians, and Paul organized a love offering so that

Christians in Gentile areas might contribute to the need. He sent information about this offering to a number of congregations. He urged the Corinthians to participate and to send representatives to Jerusalem along with their gift (1 Cor. 16:1-4).

Paul's instructions in 2 Corinthians 8–9 may be organized around the following points:

- *Appeal to complete the collection (2 Cor. 8:1-15)*. The apostle cited the generosity of the churches of Macedonia as well as Jesus' own sacrificial giving of Himself for the sake of others.
- *Administration of the collection (8:16-24)*. Paul mentioned Titus's role in the collection and promised integrity in handling their gifts.
- *Motivations for giving (9:1-15)*. These verses are our focus for this week's lesson.

So, what happened to Paul's idea? When he wrote his epistle to the Romans, not too long after he wrote 2 Corinthians, he explained that the offering had been collected and that he was accompanying both the money and the messengers to Jerusalem (Rom. 15:22-29). Acts 20:4-6 lists the seven Christians who accompanied Paul (and Luke) to deliver the money. Although Acts does not specifically report the delivery of the offering, Luke wrote that "when we reached Jerusalem, the brothers welcomed us gladly" and "they glorified God" (21:17,20). Presumably, their joy was based on the receipt of the offering as well as the good report about God's work among Gentiles. In any case, Paul's teaching on Christian giving in these chapters has proven to be an essential biblical foundation for God's people today to understand generous giving.

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

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

#### VERSE 1

Here, in one word, **ministry**, Paul summarized the way he thought about the collection for Christians in Jerusalem. It was an opportunity for service. The term in the original is *diakonia* (related to our word "deacon"). This noun was used by Luke to refer to the "preaching ministry" (Acts 6:4) which God had given to the apostles. Earlier in this letter, Paul had used the same term to explain that God had entrusted to him the "ministry of reconciliation" (5:18). Thus, for Paul, ministry was no grubby, menial matter. To be entrusted with such an opportunity was a privilege, particularly when those who benefited were saints. Paul used the word **saints**—meaning "those set apart for God"—regularly to refer to all believers (see 1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1). All who have received Christ by faith have ceased being ordinary; they have been set apart for Him.

The Corinthians knew what they ought to do about giving generously to this offering. Paul had written them about it before. He had heard that

### BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read "A 'Cheerful' Giver," an archived *Biblical Illustrator* article provided on the CD-ROM in the Spring 2018 *Explore the Bible: Leader Pack*.

### 2 CORINTHIANS 9:1

<sup>1</sup> Now concerning the ministry to the saints, it is unnecessary for me to write to you.

they were enthusiastic, at least initially. So in one sense Paul thought it was **unnecessary** for him to write about this. Yet just to be sure, he followed up in this letter with both information and instructions.

## 2 CORINTHIANS 9:2-5

<sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> Otherwise, if any Macedonians come with me and find you unprepared, we, not to mention you, would be put to shame in that situation. <sup>5</sup> 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.

### VERSE 2

Paul complimented his readers with two terms: **eagerness** and **zeal**. These believers were ready and willing to do as Paul had asked. He even let them know that he bragged about them to **the Macedonians**, that is, believers from Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea. Paul had preached in those cities shortly before he had preached in **Achaia** (the province of Corinth; see Acts 16–17). The boasting that Paul reported had likely occurred when he arrived in Macedonia sometime after he had written 1 Corinthians. Titus had met him there and given him an update on conditions in the Corinthian congregation (see 2 Cor. 2:12-13; 7:5). They had been collecting the offering since last year. Note that in 2 Corinthians 8:1-5, Paul had used the generosity of the Macedonian believers as an inspiring example for the Corinthians. He used each group’s enthusiasm to spur on the other group.

Today, we are involved with church collections for different but equally worthy kingdom causes. What’s clear is that when one group of believers hears about what other believers are doing, they become motivated. It’s a good thing indeed for us to be stirred to action when we learn about what others are doing. Testimonies are powerful!

### VERSES 3-5

In a sense, Paul’s honor was at stake in whether the Corinthians finalized the offering. To keep them and him from being disgraced by failing to complete the matter of giving, Paul sent an advance team. The **brothers** he sent consisted of Titus and an unnamed Christian (8:16-18; 12:18). Paul genuinely wanted the Corinthians to prove their commitment by being prepared with the completed offering. The verb translated **prove empty** is closely related to the phrase translated “in vain” in 2 Corinthians 6:1.

The apostle was thinking of taking Christians from Macedonia with him to Corinth. In fact, that’s what happened. He was accompanied by Sopater from Berea and Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica (see Acts 20:4). These three were part of a larger group that accompanied Paul to Jerusalem with the collection. Paul did not want to be embarrassed if he came with others to Corinth only to discover that the church was unprepared regarding the collection.

The Corinthians must have promised to collect a large sum of money, which Paul called a **generous gift**. The term he used can also be translated “blessing.” The money was to be their response to God’s grace in their lives, as the apostle had argued in 8:6-9. Knowing that the Corinthians might be fickle, however, Paul mentioned again the brothers preceding him to **arrange in advance** the offering. (Some Bible students believe that these brothers were also the letter carriers for 2 Corinthians.) On the other hand, Paul did not want the Corinthians to think that any money they gave was an **extortion**. It would be better for them not to give than to give under duress.

(In PSG, p. 112) **Why is it important for leaders to hold believers accountable for meeting the needs of others?**

## BENEFITS FOUND (2 COR. 9:6-11)

### VERSES 6-7

The recipients of the gift were not the only ones who would be blessed. Those who gave would benefit as well. Paul expanded a well-known proverb, “You reap what you sow” (see Prov. 22:8; Gal. 6:7). The references to sowing and reaping are obviously drawn from agriculture. The principle, however, applies broadly. If we invest sparingly in a situation, whether money or time or whatever, we can’t expect much to come out of it. If we invest generously, we can expect a larger return. Christian generosity is to be done unselfishly, but it is right for us to be reminded that giving is in our own best interests.

Paul emphasized that the Corinthians were not under any biblical law in the matter of giving. The Holy Spirit was to guide the conscience of the individual givers. Paul made two positive assertions. First, the individual has the responsibility, under God, to do as he **has decided in his heart**. No person can lord it over another’s conscience in this matter. Second, **God loves a cheerful giver** (another proverbial statement; see Prov. 22:9). Those whose give joyfully are thereby expressing contentment in the way God has blessed them materially. Paul also made negative assertions about Christian giving. First, **not reluctantly**; second **not ... out of compulsion**. Both terms clarify “as an extortion” from 9:5.

### VERSES 8-9

Paul focused on God’s ability to meet material needs, rather than offering guarantees about financial prosperity: **God is able**. His language is broadly inclusive, as the terms **overflow ... in every way ... always**, and **everything** indicate. Yet Paul noted that God’s **grace**—understood here in the sense of material blessings—extends to what believers **need**, rather than to what they want. Sometimes believers receive everything material they desire, but this is not what God has promised. His promise is that He will supply so that such blessings may in turn be channeled to others. Generous givers are to continue to **excel in every good work**, including giving more sacrificially than ever.

To support his claim that God’s people are meant to bless others through liberal giving, Paul cited Psalm 112:9. This psalm extols the traits of the godly person whom the psalmist identified as “the man who fears the LORD” and “the righteous man” (Ps. 112:1,6). The apostle quoted lines that describe the righteous person’s history of generosity: **He distributed freely; he gave to the poor**. Paul also included the next line from the psalm about God’s eternal favor extending to such a person: **his righteousness endures forever**. God will never forget His people’s good works, including their generosity.

## 2 CORINTHIANS 9:6-9

<sup>6</sup> The point is this: The person who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the person who sows generously will also reap generously. <sup>7</sup> Each person should do as he has decided in his heart — not reluctantly or out of compulsion, since God loves a cheerful giver. <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> As it is written: He distributed freely; he gave to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.

## 2 CORINTHIANS 9:10-11

<sup>10</sup> 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.

<sup>11</sup> You will be enriched in every way for all generosity, which produces thanksgiving to God through us.

## 2 CORINTHIANS 9:12-13

<sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> 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.

### VERSES 10-11

Other Scriptures came to Paul's mind. Isaiah 55:6 spoke about God's provision of **seed for the sower and bread for food** for His people. Hosea spoke about the importance of God's people sowing righteousness, that is, doing good deeds (including generosity), which would "reap faithful love," including the LORD's sending "righteousness on you like rain" (Hos. 10:12). The apostle used these ideas to assure the Corinthians that their giving would **increase the harvest of your righteousness**. In other words, God would give them rewards (*harvest*) for their good deeds, including their giving (*righteousness*). Paul was using *righteousness* in the sense that Jesus had used it in Matthew 6:1, meaning "deeds that demonstrate righteousness."

How would the Corinthians themselves be impacted by their generosity? Paul said they would be **enriched in every way**. He did not necessarily mean that they would receive even more material blessings. He had in mind spiritual blessings, which are much more important. He had used a form of the verb "enriched" in this sense in 1 Corinthians 1:5: "you were enriched in him in every way, in all speech and all knowledge." These believers did not "lack any spiritual gift" (1 Cor. 1:7). Another result of the Corinthians' giving was that **thanksgiving to God** would rise from those who had received the offering. Believers who give can expect that God will be thanked and that they themselves will be spiritually deepened.

(In PSG, p. 115) **What is the relationship between trust in God and one's willingness to give to meet the needs of others? How does a person's understanding of God impact his or her willingness to meet the needs of others?**

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## ADORATION GAINED (2 COR. 9:12-15)

### VERSES 12-13

Paul developed further the idea that generous giving results in thanksgiving to God. He emphasized two results of giving. The Corinthians would be part of **supplying the needs of the saints** in Jerusalem. The other result would be the **overflowing of many expressions of thanks to God**.

Giving thanks to God is one aspect of glorifying God, that is, acknowledging His supreme value. Two facets of the Corinthians' giving would display God's glory in a way others could see. First, their generosity in sharing with needy believers would be the proof provided of the genuineness of their faith (see 2 Cor. 8:8). Outward giving was evidence of inward life change. (Paul was certainly not suggesting that financial contributions can somehow help buy salvation.) Second, their giving would demonstrate ongoing growth in Christ, as an expression of

obedience to the confession of the gospel. In other words, faith in Christ is to be accompanied by ongoing obedience, of which generous giving is one example. If the Corinthians gave liberally, they would pass the test of obedience that necessarily accompanies faith in Christ.

## Faith in Christ is to be accompanied by ongoing obedience, of which generous giving is one example.

### VERSE 14

Paul mentioned added benefits the Corinthians could expect as a result of their generosity. Other believers would *pray* for them, would think more highly of them (*have deep affection for you*), and would recognize God's work in calling them to salvation (*the surpassing grace of God in you*).

Two words in this verse call for special attention. The verb translated *have deep affection* suggests a yearning for relationship and fellowship. Givers and receivers were meant to be joined together in deep concern for each other. The Greek term translated *surpassing* is the basis of our English word "hyperbole." The grace of God, while always undeserved, would be exceptionally demonstrated by the generous gift from the Corinthians.

### VERSE 15

The apostle's mind shifted to the greatest gift of all, Jesus Christ, sent by God into the world. So he broke out in a brief prayer of adoration: *thanks be to God*. He called the gift of Christ *indescribable*, a term found only here in the New Testament, meaning something so great that it cannot adequately be expressed in words. Only God's magnificent gift of Christ as the Savior of the world—Jews and Gentiles alike—is as an adequate foundation for one group of people to "dig deep into their pockets" to support another group of people far away and ethnically different. Only God's magnificent gift of Christ provides the motive for such dissimilar people to develop deep affection for each other, to thank God for each other, to recognize God's work in each other, and to pray for each other. Paul was so overwhelmed that after this short burst of praise he had no more to say on the topic of giving.

**In your own words, how can your own giving be a means of honoring God? How can those who benefit from the generosity of other believers honor God? What motives do you have for giving?**

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### 2 CORINTHIANS 9:14

<sup>14</sup> And as they pray on your behalf, they will have deep affection for you because of the surpassing grace of God in you.

### 2 CORINTHIANS 9:15

<sup>15</sup> Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

# LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

## FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

**SHARE:** Begin the session by asking, *Who is the most generous person you know? What makes you consider this person generous?*

**DO:** Invite a volunteer to read the introductory paragraph on page 109 of the PSG.

**DISCUSS:** *Why might a person question someone being generous? What motivates people to be generous toward others?* (PSG, p. 109) Say: *One doesn't need to be rich to be generous, but one simply must be generous to be generous. When have you seen this to be true?*

**EMPHASIZE:** *The Lord sometimes can use money to expose the condition of our hearts. For many, riches and wealth are a hindrance to entering the kingdom of God.*

**MINI-LECTURE:** Share a mini-lecture based on information under Understand the Context (pp. 124–125; PSG, p. 110) about the Jerusalem church's financial challenges and the Corinthians' response to the "collection for the saints."

**TRANSITION:** *In 2 Corinthians 9, Paul commended the Macedonian churches for their generosity and called the Corinthians to recommit themselves to giving to this need.*

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

**READ:** As you read aloud 2 Corinthians 9:1-5, encourage the group to listen for how Paul expressed belief that the Corinthians would resume commitment to the offering.

**CLARIFY:** Note that Paul was not criticizing the Corinthians but encouraging them to keep a commitment they had made in the past to participate in this offering.

**DISCUSS:** *What problems might arise if Christians fail to provide for the needs of others?* From the PSG (p. 112): *Why is it important for leaders to hold believers accountable for meeting the needs of others?*

**READ:** Direct a volunteer to read aloud 2 Corinthians 9:6-11, while the rest of the group locates the benefits of giving as God directs.

**HIGHLIGHT:** Emphasize that Paul described giving that is motivated by the gospel. His motivation was not receiving but rather the blessed act of giving itself.

**READ:** Invite someone to read aloud Acts 20:35, where Paul appealed to Jesus' teaching on this subject.

**DO:** Lead the group to complete the Bible Skill activity (PSG, p. 114). Focus especially on Psalm 112:9 and 2 Corinthians 9:9. Discuss: *How do the words of the psalm support what Paul wrote concerning generous giving?* (PSG, p. 114)

**SHARE:** Call attention to the third paragraph under Verses 6-7 in the PSG (p. 113). Summarize Paul's distinction between voluntary giving and giving out of compulsion. Invite volunteers to share experiences when they received or observed someone giving cheerfully.

**ASK:** For the cheerful giver, which comes first, the gift or the cheer? Explain. How is giving a source of cheer? How does a cheerful heart move a person to meet the needs of others? (PSG, p. 113)

**GUIDE:** Summarize the Key Doctrine on page 112 of the PSG. Guide the group to express how the doctrine of stewardship is seen in 2 Corinthians 9:7. Emphasize that giving is one of the gifts of the Spirit by referring to **Pack Item 8** (*Handout: Paul's List of Spiritual Gifts*). Note from the pack item that giving is discussed in Romans 12:6-8. Direct a volunteer to read that passage. Ask: *What does that passage say about our giving?*

**TRANSITION:** Paul reminded the Corinthian believers that God would be glorified and honored, using their gifts to demonstrate His faithfulness.

**READ:** Invite someone to read aloud 2 Corinthians 9:12-15, while the group listens for the outcome of giving to others (to glorify God).

**STUDY:** Direct the group to re-read 2 Corinthians 9:12-15, underlining words that describe the Corinthians' act of giving and its results.

**DISCUSS:** *How can giving be an act of worship? How can giving be a means of honoring God? How can the person receiving a gift honor God?* (PSG, p. 115)

**DO:** Direct attention to the last paragraph under Verses 14-15 (PSG, p. 116). Say: *All Christian giving is carried out in light of God's indescribable gift to us: His Son.* Invite a volunteer to recite John 3:16. Ask: *In what ways does God's generosity in the gift of His Son challenge believers to meet the needs of others?* (PSG, p. 116)

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## SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

**GUIDE:** Call attention to the three bulleted statements listed under In My Context (PSG, p. 117). Lead the group to propose how each statement relates to the session summary statement in the PSG (p. 109): *Believers show trust in God by using their resources to meet the needs of others.*

**CHALLENGE:** Lead the group to respond to the first question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 117): *As a group, discuss appropriate ways of challenging each other to meet the needs of others in the community and to meet the needs of the church. What adjustments need to be made within the group based on this discussion?* Pick one or two adjustments for which your group can develop action items. Schedule a time to make plans to implement these actions.

**PRAY:** Lead in a time of silent prayer, during which you ask God to guide the group in meeting the needs of others and of the church. After the silent prayer, invite the group to read aloud 2 Corinthians 9:15.



## PRACTICE

- Spend concentrated time in prayer for those in your group who are struggling financially. Pray that this session will help them trust in God to provide for their needs as well as inspire them to use their resources to help others.
- Follow up on the In My Context challenge about making adjustments to meet the needs of others. Remind the group about the meeting scheduled to discuss action items.
- Review the past twelve sessions on 1 and 2 Corinthians in preparation for next week's session (the final session in the unit). Make notes of key points to emphasize.

## MORE IDEAS

### FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

To supplement the Focus Attention idea, fill two containers with unequal amounts of pennies. Provide a third empty container labeled "Offering." Invite a volunteer to remove four pennies from each of the containers and put it in the offering container. Point out that while the amounts given were the same, the circumstances for giving differed. Read aloud 2 Corinthians 8:1-5 to provide background about the Macedonians.

### EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To supplement the discussion of 2 Corinthians 9:1-5, give a mini-lecture about tithing, giving to the ministries of the church. Use a Bible dictionary or commentary for background.
- To enhance the discussion of 2 Corinthians 9:6-11, instruct volunteers to draw a variety of face emoticons somewhere prominent in the room. Use smartphones for ideas. Lead the group to select the emoticon that best represents their current attitude toward giving. Ask: *How can you work toward being a more cheerful giver?*
- As an option for 2 Corinthians 9:12-15, display the photo of a water faucet. (Or, if your meeting room has a sink, turn on the faucet.) Ask: *How do you trust that a faucet will provide water?* Invite a volunteer to read aloud 2 Corinthians 9:8. Lead group members to consider which best describes the way they are using their gifts to demonstrate God's faithfulness: turned off, steady drip, or overflowing.

### SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

To supplement the challenge, survey the group about needs in your community and in your church. Once ideas have been presented, discuss the second question set from In My Context (PSG, p. 117): *Ask God to show you a need that you are to meet. Ask Him for the courage and faith to address that need. Record your actions here.*

### SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

Lead the group to read responsively the words of "Because I Have Been Given Much," by Grace Noll Crowell. Read one line, and then invite the group to read the next line. (Lines are separated by semicolons, commas, and periods.)

# FINDING STRENGTH

Believers can trust in God's strength when confronted with their weaknesses.

## 2 CORINTHIANS 12:7b-10; 13:2-8

**MEMORY VERSE: 2 CORINTHIANS 12:9**

- **READ** 2 Corinthians 10:1–13:13, First Thoughts (p. 134), and Understand the Context (pp. 134–135). Review **PACK ITEM 2** (*Outline: 1,2 Corinthians*) and **PACK ITEM 7** (*Handout: Corinthians Time Line*) to further set the context for this session as the last in our study of 1 and 2 Corinthians.
- **STUDY** 2 Corinthians 12:7b-10; 13:2-8, using Explore the Text (pp. 135–139). As you study, notice the different ways Paul used variations of the word “weak” in these passages. Highlight instances of weakness being a good thing.
- **PLAN** the group time using the ideas under Lead Group Bible Study on pages 140–141. Tailor the plans for your group with More Ideas (p. 142) and ideas included online at [Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible/Adults](http://Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible/Adults).
- **GROW** from expert insights on weekly studies through the Ministry Grid ([MinistryGrid.com/Web/ExploretheBible](http://MinistryGrid.com/Web/ExploretheBible)).
- **GATHER** the following items:  Personal Study Guides  Paper and pens for each person. Make copies of:  **PACK ITEM 7** (*Handout: Corinthians Time Line*). Prepare to display:  **PACK ITEM 2** (*Outline: 1,2 Corinthians*).



## KEY DOCTRINE

### *Salvation*

Sanctification is the experience, beginning in regeneration, by which the believer is set apart to God's purposes, and is enabled to progress toward moral and spiritual maturity through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit dwelling in him.

## BIBLE SKILL

*Memorize a verse and apply it to a real life situation.*

Memorize 2 Corinthians 12:9 in your preferred Bible translation. Then write the verse in your own words. Finally, write a couple of sentences here or in a journal, stating how the verse can help you today make a tough decision or face a difficult situation.

# FIRST THOUGHTS

Many people have a weakness or on-going difficulty they consider an impediment or liability. They may pray for the removal of this perceived liability or seek other ways to overcome it. This week's study reminds us that God can use our weaknesses to anchor our faith, strengthen our witness, and magnify His grace and power.

(In PSG, p. 118) **What are some personal weaknesses or on-going afflictions you find it difficult to live with? What are some possible ways God might use those weaknesses for His purposes and His glory?**

We have the apostle Paul to thank for the phrase, "thorn in the flesh," which has been widely used—and widely misused. Some people have used the term to refer to a chronic physical ailment. Sometimes the term is applied to a difficult person. Others think of the thorn in terms of sins of the heart, such as lust or greed.

Paul did not specify what his thorn in the flesh was. The important matter is to recognize that God's strength is available to us when we confront any weaknesses. In this week's Scripture passages, Paul shared insights learned through his own struggles, and gave his final challenge to the Corinthians to examine their lives, weaknesses and all, for evidence of a living faith.

# UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

## 2 CORINTHIANS 10:1–13:13

This week's lesson has brought us to the third and final section of 2 Corinthians. In broad terms, the first section focused on Paul's ministry as an apostle (chaps. 1–7). Then, as we learned in last week's study, the second section was about the collection for the Christians in Jerusalem (chaps. 8–9). In chapters 10–13, Paul's primary concern was to defend himself against the unfair charges of those who had infiltrated the Corinthian church and were trying to turn the believers against him. He denounced them as false apostles (11:13-15).

We can outline Paul's presentation in this last section of the epistle around the following points:

- *Paul's authority as a genuine apostle of Jesus (10:1-18)*
- *Paul's condemnation of the false apostles (11:1-15)*
- *Paul's sufferings for the sake of Christ (11:16-33)*
- *Paul's experience of God's sufficient grace (12:1-10)*

- *Paul's miraculous signs as evidence of his apostleship (12:11-13)*
- *Paul's concern for the Corinthians (12:14-21)*
- *Paul's final warnings and exhortations (13:1-13)*

This week's study is taken partly from the apostle's description of how he had drawn strength from God's grace working in his life, particularly in light of his thorn in the flesh. The balance of the study is taken from Paul's final exhortations to the Corinthians. He reminded them that the power of the gospel was at work among them, even in such unexpected ways as God's discipline. He also urged them to examine their lives concerning the genuineness of their faith. As we investigate the first passage for this study (12:7b-10), do your best to identify with Paul as he described the way he confronted his weaknesses. Then as we focus on the second passage (13:2-8), seek to identify with the Corinthians as they received this final challenge from the apostle.

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

### PAUL'S WEAKNESS (2 COR. 12:7b-10)

#### VERSE 7b

In the opening verses of 2 Corinthians 12, Paul wrote about extraordinary experiences, including visions from God, which he had received. Such things might have made him arrogant or conceited, which God detests. To keep him humble, God sent him an ongoing difficulty. He described this difficulty in puzzling terms.

First, he called the difficulty ***a thorn in the flesh***. The challenge Bible students face is knowing whether he meant "flesh" in the sense of his physical body or in the sense of his lower, sinful nature. If he meant a physical problem, he could have been referring to poor eyesight or some disease (see Gal. 4:13-15). If he meant a problem because of his sinful nature, he might have been thinking of his ongoing grief because he had persecuted early believers or some other issue that we might call psychological, including a "besetting sin" or ongoing temptation.

Second, he referred to the difficulty as ***a messenger of Satan***. Some Bible students take this to refer to Paul's persecutors, whom the devil constantly sent Paul's way, such as the false apostles he combated in this letter. Or perhaps the apostle was aware of some kind of demonic harassment, as in the case of Job in the Old Testament.

Third, Paul described the difficulty as ongoing and excruciating. He wrote that it came to ***torment*** him. He used a present-tense form (implying that it was permanent) of a verb that typically meant beating with the fists, including shame and humiliation. Whatever the thorn was, it had become a lifelong problem. God's purpose was clear. Twice in this verse Paul noted that the thorn was given ***so that I would not exalt myself***. As we will see, God's purpose was achieved.

### BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read "Titus and the Church at Corinth" and "'Righteousness' in Paul's Writings" in the Spring 2018 issue of Biblical Illustrator. Available at [LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator](http://LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator).

#### 2 CORINTHIANS 12:7b

**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.

## 2 CORINTHIANS 12:8-9

<sup>8</sup> Concerning this, I pleaded with the Lord three times that it would leave me. <sup>9</sup> 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.

## 2 CORINTHIANS 12:10

<sup>10</sup> 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.

### VERSES 8-9

Perhaps Paul knew that Jesus had prayed in Gethsemane for the cup of suffering to be removed from Him (Mark 14:32-41). In Jesus’ case, God’s answer was “no.” Jesus submitted to God’s plan for Him to die on the cross. In Paul’s case, the answer from the Lord was not what he prayed for but actually turned out to be much better. When he received the Lord’s answer, he stopped praying for the thorn to be taken away from him.

What Paul received from the Lord was a promise, “**My grace is sufficient for you.**” Whatever our circumstances, we are to remember that God has extended His favor, undeserved, toward us. Indeed, it is only because of His grace that we were saved from eternal destruction. If His grace was extended to us when we were the least deserving, then it will be more than enough to meet any difficulties of this life (Rom. 8:31-39).

### It was more important for Paul to look to the “Blesser” than to the blessing.

God wanted Paul to learn that relying on Him was more valuable than removal of the thorn. Another way of putting it: it was more important for Paul to look to the “Blesser” than to the blessing. His **weakness** was the occasion for God’s **power** to work. Further, God’s power was **perfected**—completed, displayed at its best—when contrasted clearly with Paul’s inability. Paul was no masochist, enjoying pain for pain’s sake. Yet he turned God’s unexpected answer into an occasion for glorifying God. He no longer petitioned; he praised. His weaknesses had become the means by which Christ’s power was seen to **reside in** him. The verb rendered *reside in* may be translated “rest on” or “pitch a tent on.” Just as God’s glory rested on the Israelites’ tabernacle (Ex. 40:34-38), so now Christ’s power had come upon Paul.

### VERSE 10

Paul took **pleasure** in what he endured not because he liked being tormented and feeling powerless. He could enjoy his weaknesses only because of Christ. Thus, he was neither a fanatic, inflicting himself with suffering, nor was he a fool, happily suffering the results of his own foolhardiness. Rather, he was a devoted follower of Jesus, for whose sake he endured.

The five kinds of trouble that Paul mentioned reinforce each other. Taken together, they summarize the apostle’s demanding work as a traveling missionary. He had listed specific troubles in 2 Corinthians 11:24-28. We have not endured the same problems as Paul, yet we can identify with his conclusion on the matter: **For when I am weak, then I am strong.**

(In PSG, p. 122) **How does God use weaknesses and thorns to bring about His purposes and to shape believers’ lives? How do weaknesses cause believers to grow in their trust of God?**

## CHRIST'S STRENGTH (2 COR. 13:2-4)

### VERSE 2

Paul had devoted much time and energy to the Corinthian congregation. He invested a year and a half when he planted the church (Acts 18:11). When he learned about their troubles, he wrote 1 Corinthians. Sometime after that, he returned to them on what he called a “painful visit” (2 Cor. 2:1). On that occasion, he gave a warning to the church that they needed to repent; later he sent Titus as his ambassador (7:5-7). Now he was writing another letter, and again he found himself in the situation in which he must give **a warning**, this time from a distance.

The warning was addressed to those who sinned before and were still unrepentant. These were the people in the congregation who had not responded to his instructions in the first epistle and on his painful visit. **All the rest** referred to those who might still be unrepentant after receiving this second epistle. Thus, Paul was aware that a third visit might also be unpleasant. His words **if I come again** were actually fulfilled when he returned to Corinth in connection with completing the love offering for the Jerusalem Christians (Acts 20:2-3; 2 Cor. 9:4).

The phrase **I will not be lenient** points to Paul's willingness to engage in disciplinary action against those who stubbornly remained in their sins. He did not say what the discipline would consist of, but he meant it to be redemptive rather than punitive, as in 1 Corinthians 5:4-5.

### VERSES 3-4

One of the sins of the Corinthians was that they challenged whether Paul was an authentic apostle of Jesus. They were still seeking **proof** of Christ speaking in and through Paul. He was not trying to lord it over them, but he was insistent that he was a genuine messenger of the Lord. In the actions that he would undertake in disciplining them, they would see the proof they were looking for. After that, they could not doubt Paul's genuineness.

Whatever the Corinthians may have thought about Paul as a weak man or weak preacher (1 Cor. 1:27-28), they could never think that Christ Himself had been **weak** toward them. Rather, He had been **powerful** among them (1:4-8).

Christ has all authority; He had shown the power of His gospel among the Corinthians. Yet there was a time when **weakness** seemed to be His dominant characteristic. That was when He was **crucified**. In humbling Himself by taking on the sins of humanity, He submitted to the most horrible of deaths. However, that was momentary. He was raised and now forever **lives by the power of God**.

Paul knew that his weakness was parallel to Christ's own experience: **we also are weak in him**. It was only because of Paul's spiritual union with Christ (*in him*) that he was able to make the comparison. Further, his experience of power was like Christ's: **in dealing with you we will live ... by God's power**. Paul had the authority of the resurrected Christ as an apostle, and the fact that he had appeared weak up till this point should not be misunderstood. He had the authority granted to him by the Lord Himself.

### 2 CORINTHIANS 13:2

<sup>2</sup> 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,

### 2 CORINTHIANS 13:3-4

<sup>3</sup> since you seek proof of Christ speaking in me. He is not weak in dealing with you, but powerful among you.  
<sup>4</sup> 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.

He was certain that Christ's power would be evident to all as he disciplined the Corinthians when he arrived for his third visit.

(In PSG, p.124) **How is discipline an act of love? If God failed to discipline His followers, would He be viewed as weak or strong? Explain.**

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## OUR CHOICE (2 COR. 13:5-8)

### VERSES 5-6

Paul's critics in Corinth had in effect subjected him to a test of apostleship: Was he truly an apostle of Jesus Christ? They had demanded that he give them proof of his spiritual authority. Now Paul turned the tables. It was they, not he, who needed to be given an examination. Thus, he challenged them: **test yourselves ... examine yourselves**. The verb *test* carried the idea of putting someone (or something) through a trial so that its true character may be determined. (In other contexts, this same verb meant "tempt," that is, to entice someone to sin.) The verb *examine* carried the idea of examining something or someone to determine whether it was genuine or approved. Note that Paul used the pronoun *yourselves* three times in this verse, as if he were saying, "It's you, you, you, not me, who need to go through a test." They were the ones who should engage in serious soul searching.

So what was the test? Based on verse 5, Paul wanted the Corinthians to ask themselves two questions: First, are you **in the faith**? By *the faith*, Paul meant the Christian faith, that is, faith looked at objectively as a system of beliefs and behaviors (as in 1 Cor. 16:13, "stand firm in the faith"; see also 1 Tim. 4:1; 6:21). Of course, included implicitly is the question of whether the Corinthians were people who had truly trusted Christ. Did they have faith, looked at subjectively and personally? So the question was whether they were personally committed to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

### If they could not see His "tracks" in their lives, then they should be very concerned.

The second test question was this: do you **recognize that Jesus Christ is in you**? If Christ indwelt them through the Holy Spirit—as is the case with all genuine believers (Rom. 8:9)—then marks of His presence should be evident. But if they could not see His "tracks" in their lives, then they should be very concerned. Did they **fail the test**? Were they unapproved, merely seeming to be followers of Jesus?

Paul assured his readers that if they examined him, they would find **we ourselves do not fail the test**. (Again, as noted several times in these studies, he typically used "we" forms to refer to himself in this letter.) He was in the faith; he had Christ's presence in his life; and he was glad for

### 2 CORINTHIANS 13:5-6

<sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> And I hope you will recognize that we ourselves do not fail the test.

those claims to be tested and demonstrated. Just as Abraham's faith was proven genuine by testing (Gen. 22:1), so it was with Paul, and indeed, with every believer.

#### VERSE 7

Paul expected the Corinthians to respond to his urgent warning. If and when he arrived there, he would deal strenuously with any who were still unrepentant (2 Cor. 13:2). Thus, he wrote out his prayer for them: **that you do nothing wrong**. He wanted them to do what is right. His primary concern was with the congregation, not with his own reputation. It was a matter of secondary importance to him that he **appear to pass the test** of authenticity by the members of the congregation. He had already written about the marks of an apostle present in his ministry (12:11-13). If, in the eyes of his critics in Corinth—the false apostles, to be specific—he did appear to fail, that was not his main concern.

#### VERSE 8

Why was Paul so concerned for the Corinthians to test themselves regarding the genuineness of their relationship to Christ? Because his ministry was defined by the proclamation of **the truth** about Jesus and the urgency for those who heard the truth to respond in repentance and faith. If that had not happened in Corinth, his efforts there were wasted.

In every place he went, Paul was careful not to act or speak against the truth. His passion was to speak for the truth. He was not speaking about truth in some abstract form or truth in some generic sense, although Paul would never have spoken falsehood regarding any matter. Rather by *the truth* in this verse, he meant the gospel truth about salvation in Jesus Christ. In other words, Paul was single minded. His commission and passion was to proclaim the good news in all circumstances and in every possible way. He would never do anything to hinder the advance of the message of Jesus Christ.

(In PSG, p. 125) **What is the difference between approaching others to convince them that you are right and approaching others so they can be right? How is the way in which a person approaches another person a test of faith and maturity for the approaching person?**

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#### 2 CORINTHIANS 13:7

<sup>7</sup> 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.

#### 2 CORINTHIANS 13:8

<sup>8</sup> For we can't do anything against the truth, but only for the truth.

# LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

## FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

**ILLUSTRATE:** Prior to the group's arrival, create a display of snack foods over which people might say they can't control themselves (examples: chips, candy). As the group arrives, invite them to sample the snacks and name their favorite irresistible snack or favorite food.

**CLARIFY:** Note that self-control over snacks is a small representation over the recurring temptations or besetting sins with which some people struggle.

**DISCUSS:** *What are some personal weaknesses or ongoing afflictions you find it difficult to live with? What are some possible ways God might use those weaknesses for His purposes and His glory?* (PSG, p. 118)

**SAY:** *In this week's study, we'll see that Paul struggled with an ongoing issue. He referred to this as a thorn in his flesh. Paul shared insights learned through his own struggles, showing how God's strength is available when we confront our weaknesses.*

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

**READ:** Guide the group to listen for Paul's attitude toward his thorn in the flesh, or weakness, as a volunteer reads aloud 2 Corinthians 12:7b-10.

**CLARIFY:** Use information in the second paragraph under Verses 7b-8 (PSG, p. 120) to overview three categories of possible explanations offered by Bible scholars. Note that many believe it was a physical issue that annoyed Paul and, at times, caused difficulties to his ministry.

**GUIDE:** Call for volunteers to name two important spiritual truths that Paul learned through his thorn in the flesh. Then, say: *God allowed Paul's thorn in the flesh to remain as a reminder of Paul's need for dependence upon God and His grace. Paul viewed his weakness as a source of strength.*

**DISCUSS:** *How does God use weaknesses and thorns to bring about His purposes and to shape believers' lives? How do weaknesses cause believers to grow in their trust of God?* (PSG, p. 122)

**READ:** Read aloud 2 Corinthians 13:2-4, calling for the group to listen for the content of Paul's warning.

**CLARIFY:** Use information in the first paragraph under Verse 2 (PSG, p. 122) for brief background about why Paul gave a warning to the Corinthians. Explain that Paul was not bullying the Christians or seeking to terrify them with his authority; rather, he was trying to build them up.

**ASK:** *What role should the church and church leaders play in holding believers accountable for spiritual growth? What is the responsibility of the individual when challenged to grow spiritually?* (PSG, p. 123)

**DISCUSS:** Note that Paul warned those who doubted his authority that his authority was being demonstrated by the power of the gospel among the Corinthian believers. Lead the group to recall times they have seen the power of the gospel demonstrated, whether through the church or elsewhere.

**DISCUSS:** *How is discipline an act of love? If God failed to discipline His followers, would He be viewed as weak or strong? Explain.* (PSG, p. 124)

**READ:** Direct someone to read 2 Corinthians 13:5-8. Guide the rest of the group to listen for how Paul challenged the Corinthian hearers to examine their faith, looking for evidence of their salvation.

**CLARIFY:** Encourage people to carefully examine their spiritual lives without casting unnecessary doubts. Use information under Verses 5-6 and Verses 7-8 in the PSG (pp. 124-125) to clarify examination-related words. Ask: *How might a person test his or her faith? Why might it be important for them to do so?* (PSG, p. 125)

**SAY:** *It's not about whether or not Paul appeared to pass the test. What is important is whether or not the Corinthians themselves demonstrated Christ in the midst of their trials.*

**DISCUSS:** *What is the difference between approaching others to convince them that you are right and approaching others so they can be right? How is the way in which a person approaches another person a test of faith and maturity for the approaching person?* (PSG, p. 125)

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## SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

**REVIEW:** Call attention to the summary statement under the session title on page 118 of the PSG: *Believers can trust in God's strength when confronted with their weaknesses.* Invite volunteers to suggest ways this truth is demonstrated in today's Bible passage. Point out the bulleted statements under In My Context (PSG, p. 126). Lead the group to propose how each bulleted statement relates to the session summary statement.

**CHALLENGE:** Lead the group to respond to the first question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 126): *Share with the group ways God is using a "thorn" to shape and mold you for His honor. Record insights gained from others as they share. How can you learn from them?*

**SUMMARIZE:** Use **Pack Item 2** (*Outline: 1,2 Corinthians*) and **Pack Item 7** (*Handout: Corinthians Time Line*) to position this as the final session in this thirteen-session study. Invite volunteers to share brief insights from the study of 1 and 2 Corinthians.

**PRAY:** Lead in a time of silent prayer, inviting the group to reflect on areas in which they are weak. Close by thanking God that we can trust His strength when we are weak.



## PRACTICE

- Be sure all individuals in the group have a PSG for the new Summer 2018 study, which will begin next week.
- Connect with the group via email or social media to remind them of the memory verse (2 Cor. 12:9) and journal activity for this session.
- Review your group meetings over the past three sessions. What ideas most drew in the group's attention and discussion? Identify teaching styles you have not used yet. Keep the list close by as you prepare for future group sessions, especially as you begin a new topic of study.

## MORE IDEAS

### FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

To supplement the Focus Attention idea, recall the song "Jesus Loves Me" by Anna B. Warner. Focus on these lyrics that emphasize our weakness and Jesus' strength. Point out the song often is associated with children, but the awareness of God's strength is an important concept for believers of any age.

### EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To supplement the discussion of 2 Corinthians 12:7b-10, invite a volunteer to read aloud 2 Corinthians 12:9, this session's memory verse. Suggest that the group reflect on their "thorn in the flesh" and substitute it for the word "weakness." Use the Bible Skill activity (PSG, p. 122) to further apply this verse to daily life.
- To enhance the discussion of 2 Corinthians 13:2-4, lead the group to imagine they are giving the warning in these verses from the standpoint of a parent. Form pairs, and direct the pairs to restate Paul's comments as a loving parent writing to a teenager.
- To supplement the study of 2 Corinthians 13:5-8, lead the group to name types of examinations people take or undergo (examples: academic, skill-based, medical, occupational, athletic). Discuss: *What is the purpose of examinations? Why are they necessary? How do these principles apply to examining our lives spiritually?*

### SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

To supplement the challenge, direct the group to scan the bulleted summary statements in their PSGs. Call for volunteers to share statements that stand out to them. Reflect on how these statements have influenced thoughts and actions during the last few weeks.

### SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

Close the session by leading the group to sing the first verse of "Just a Closer Walk with Thee." Guide the group to identify ways in which this song would have been appropriate for Paul as he encouraged the Corinthians.

# LEADER PACK IDEAS

These items are available on the CD-ROM in the *Explore the Bible: Leader Pack* as PDFs to create your own handouts or media presentations for your group. Items marked with \* are also available as reproducible masters on the CD-ROM included in the *Explore the Bible Leader Pack*.

## ➤➤ PACK ITEM 1

*Map: Paul's Second Missionary Journey*

Sessions 1,9

Use the map on page 155 or locate a map in a Bible atlas that shows the missionary journeys of Paul.



**Pack Item 1 example** from *Explore the Bible Leader Pack* (The Pack is available for purchase at [LifeWay.com/ExploreTheBible](http://LifeWay.com/ExploreTheBible).)

## PACK ITEM 2

*Outline: 1,2 Corinthians*

Sessions 1,2,8,9,13

Refer to the outline printed on page 12.

## PACK ITEM 3

*Key Verse: 2 Corinthians 5:20*

Sessions 4,7,8,11

Display 2 Corinthians 5:20 on a whiteboard or large sheet of paper.

## PACK ITEM 4

*Poster: Problems in Corinth*

Sessions 1,3,4,6

Create a poster that lists the following information:

- Those Who Bring Division in the Church
- The Treatment of Fellow Christians Living in Sin
- Matters of Sexuality in Marriage and Divorce
- Disputes About Food
- Propriety in Church Worship
- Spiritual Gifts
- The Resurrection

## PACK ITEM 5

*Map: Reconstruction of Corinth*

Sessions 2,10

Use a Bible atlas to locate the primary locations inside ancient Corinth, paying particular attention to the locations of the temples.

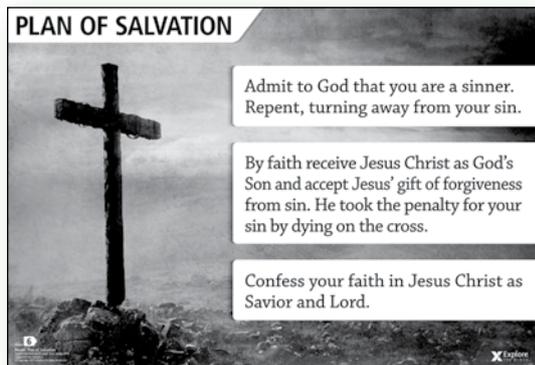
## PACK ITEM 6

*Poster: Plan of Salvation*

Session 5

Create a poster that lists the following information from page 2:

- 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.



**Pack Item 6 example** from *Explore the Bible Leader Pack* (The Pack is available for purchase at [LifeWay.com/ExploreTheBible](http://LifeWay.com/ExploreTheBible).)

## PACK ITEM 7

*Handout: Corinthians Time Line*

Sessions 2,9,13

Locate a study Bible with a time line of the major people and events in 1 and 2

Corinthians (from 1,000 BC–AD 57). Use it as a reference during this study.

## PACK ITEM 8

*Handout: Paul's List of Spiritual Gifts*

Sessions 7,8,12

Create a poster of each of the spiritual gifts, as listed in the following Scriptures: Romans 12:6-8; 1 Corinthians 12:8-10; 1 Corinthians 12:28-30; and Ephesians 4:11.

## PACK ITEM 9

*Handout: References to the Lord's Supper*

Session 6

Use a Bible dictionary to explain the meaning of these terms:

- Lord's Supper
- Eucharist
- Communion
- Fellowship

## PACK ITEM 10

*Handout: Resurrection Appearances in Scripture*

Sessions 5,6

Create a handout of the following people who encountered the risen Jesus and the related Scripture references.

- Cephas (Luke 24:34)
- The Twelve (Luke 24:36-43)
- The 500 (Acts 1:9-11)
- James (Acts 15:13)
- Apostles (John 20:24-29)
- Paul (Acts 9:1-9)

## PACK ITEM 11

Handout: *Key Idols in Corinth*

Sessions 3,10

Use a Bible dictionary or handbook to provide information on some of the gods worshiped in Corinth:

- Apollo
- Aphrodite
- Poseidon
- Serapis
- Asclepius



**Pack Item 11 example** from *Explore the Bible Leader Pack* (The Pack is available for purchase at [LifeWay.com/ExploreTheBible](http://LifeWay.com/ExploreTheBible).)

## PACK ITEM 12

Handout: *Problems in Corinth*

Sessions 1,4,6

Use a Bible handbook to provide further information on these problems in Corinth:

- Those Who Bring Division in the Church
- The Treatment of Fellow Christians Living in Sin
- Matters of Sexuality in Marriage and Divorce
- Disputes About Food

- Propriety in Church Worship
- Spiritual Gifts
- The Resurrection

## PACK ITEM 13

Bookmark: *Memory Verses*

Sessions 1-13

Make a list of these suggested memory verses to distribute to your group:

- 1 Corinthians 1:23
- 1 Corinthians 6:14
- 1 Corinthians 7:17
- 1 Corinthians 10:31
- 1 Corinthians 15:20
- 1 Corinthians 11:26
- 1 Corinthians 12:26
- 1 Corinthians 13:4
- 2 Corinthians 1:4
- 2 Corinthians 5:9
- 2 Corinthians 5:21
- 2 Corinthians 9:7
- 2 Corinthians 12:9



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# “THE PRIZE” IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

By Bill Patterson



*“Now everyone who competes exercises self-control in everything. They do it to receive a perishable crown, but we an imperishable crown” (1 Cor. 9:25).*

The apostle Paul put into practice his advice to be “all things to all people” for the advancement of the gospel (1 Cor. 9:22). For instance, he used words and concepts familiar to the recipients of his letters. To those living in business centers, he employed the terminology of “profit and loss” (Phil. 3:7-9) and of a “ledger” (1 Cor. 13:5; 2 Cor. 5:19). To the intellectual elite of Athens, he referred to poets and philosophers (Acts 17:16-31).

Paul frequently used athletic imagery. He wrote of foot races (1 Cor. 9:24), of the goal before him (Phil. 3:13-14), of boxing (1 Cor. 9:26; 1 Tim. 6:12), and of strip-ping off excess weight before running (Heb. 12:1-2).<sup>1</sup>

Paul mentioned “the prize” only twice, however, both times to Christians in Greek cities (1 Cor. 9:24; Phil. 3:14). The Greeks held the four most famous competitions in the world and readily identified with Paul’s athletic terminology. The word “prize” originally referred to the activity of a judge or referee of an athletic event. The judge began the competition; enforced the rules; and awarded the winner laurel, parsley, wild olive, or pine garland. Eventually “prize” referred less to the judge’s duties and more to the winner’s reward, his wreath.<sup>2</sup>

## IN PHILIPPIANS

Paul wrote both to the Philippians and Corinthians about the prize awaiting them. Philippi was a Roman colony in Macedonia (northern Greece) along the famous road, the Via Egnatia. Many believe that in Philippians 3, Paul was referring to a chariot race. The Romans had built hippodromes and made chariot racing popular in their provincial cities. In that context, the Philippians easily grasped Paul's use of "prize" as a motivator for their faith. When Paul wrote of "forgetting what is behind" and "stretching forward to what is ahead," he referenced the prize of heaven before him. The imagery may have reflected a driver who, in order to reduce wind resistance, leaned over the front of his chariot. The driver who looked back put his horses in danger of wrecking.<sup>3</sup> The one who stretched forward did his best to win the race. Paul urged the Philippians to stretch for their best in life's race for God.

When Paul wrote of the "upward call" of God in Christ Jesus, the Philippians would have reflected on the action of the umpire at the end of the athletic events. That judge sat on the judgment seat elevated above the participants. For each race, a herald would call the winner's name. Each winner heard the "upward call" of his name and ascended the steps to stand beside the judge in order to receive his prize. Of course, we Christians look forward to our eternal, upward call of God.<sup>4</sup>

## IN 1 CORINTHIANS

Corinth served as the capital of Achaia (southern Greece). The Corinthians took pride in the Isthmian games, held every two years on the isthmus just east of Corinth. Along with the Olympics, the Pythian, and the Nemean, the Isthmian Games were famous in the Roman Empire. The Olympics and Pythian Games occurred every four years, but the Isthmian Games held huge popularity because they gave athletes a venue every other year.<sup>5</sup> Foot races held the primary attraction; but wrestling, javelin throwing, boxing, and an event similar to our mixed martial arts also took place.

Jewish people generally did not participate in or watch the games. For one thing, each game began with a dedication to a god. The Olympics, begun in 776 B.C., were committed to Zeus; the Pythian Games to Apollo, the Nemean Games to Zeus, and the Isthmian Games to Poseidon; thus, the Jews regarded the games as idolatrous. Orthodox Jews also opposed the games because the contestants (all male) often competed without clothing. Many Jews believed this practice promoted immorality. Antiochus had built athletic stadiums in Jerusalem but when the Maccabees took over (162 B.C.), athletic events fell into disfavor.

While some suggest that the apostle Paul never attended the games, many conservative biblical scholars disagree. After all, Paul grew up as a Roman citizen in Tarsus and would have had opportunities to watch many sporting events. He probably witnessed some of the games and maybe even part of the extensive training that occurred during the nine months leading up to them.

The Corinthians knew of the Isthmian Games and identified with Paul's terminology of "the prize." Paul lived in Corinth eighteen months during his second missionary journey and visited several times from Ephesus (once for three months) during his third missionary journey. He likely lived in the city during the time of the Isthmian Games, and, if not, certainly during the months of training.

This writer holds that part of what Paul meant in being "all things to all people, so that I may by every possible means save some" (1 Cor. 9:22) included watching athletic events



in places where people loved sports. Can you envision Paul striking up a conversation at the Isthmian Games?

*Paul:* “Hey, you watch these events often?”

*Bystander:* “Sure do. Every two years. Like most Corinthians, I never miss them.”

*Paul:* “I notice the judge awards a wreath.”

*Bystander:* “Yeah, the winner gets the crown of woven pine needles. They used to give parsley headdresses but they only use pine today.”

*Paul:* “Doesn’t that wreath fade away?”

*Bystander:* “Well, sure; but we remember the winners.”

*Paul:* “Can I tell you about a prize that never fades?”

*Bystander:* “What do you mean?”

*Paul:* “I’m in a race, too. But I run for a prize that lasts forever. Would you like to know more ... ?”

I can imagine Paul striking up dozens of evangelistic conversations each day during the games as he worked to extend the Lord’s kingdom.

## IN CONTEXT

In Corinthians and Philippians Paul used the term “prize” in two ways. First, he wrote of the discipline required by the athlete in order to be in his best shape to win the prize. Likewise we Christians should discipline ourselves to accomplish the most for our Lord.

Second, Paul wrote of “the prize” referring to its being the winner’s reward. Paul did not intend readers to think of earning our salvation. It is a gift our Lord freely gives—by grace through faith. Like the runners looked forward to the winner’s prize at the end of the race, a Christian also looks forward to the reward.

As I wrote this article news came of four Wycliffe Bible translators in the Middle East who were killed because they promoted Christianity. These and thousands of other Christian martyrs each year do not die in vain. They leave a godly witness and each goes to heaven to claim the prize. You and I also look forward to the day when our Lord will say, “Well done, good and faithful servant! ... Share your master’s joy.” (Matt. 25:21). On that day, Christian, you will receive a prize that does not fade.

This article originally appeared in the Spring 2017 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Bill Patterson is director of missions of the Green Valley Baptist Association, Henderson, Kentucky.

1. Some scholars believe the apostle Paul did not write Hebrews. That discussion is not the purpose of this article. For further examples of Paul’s use of athletic imagery, see Acts 20:24; Galatians 2:2; 5:7; Philippians 1:30; 2:16; Colossians 1:29; 2:1; 2:18; 4:12; 1 Timothy 6:12.
2. Ethelbert Stauffer, “βραβεύω βραβεῖον” (brabeuo, brabeion; to act like a judge, prize) in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 637-38; Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, vol. 4 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1931), 455.
3. *Saint Paul’s Epistle to the Philippians* (London: Macmillan, 1881), 152-53.
4. Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 564.
5. The Corinthians celebrated the Isthmian Games about April in the first and third Olympic years. See Xenophon, Hellenica 4.5.1 in *The Complete and Unabridged Historical Works of Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, Arrian* (New York: Random House, 1942), 102.

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# PAUL'S PLEA FOR UNITY

By Michael W. Olewski



“I wish we could have church like they did in the first century.” Some might make this statement because of problems in their own church, thinking no problems existed in the first-century church. Problems, though, did exist. A recurring issue was disunity.

Jesus had emphasized the need for unity. He prayed that all believers would experience the oneness with one another that He experienced with the Father—and they with Him (John 17). His hope was the world would see that He had come from the Father and that His followers were in Him.

Unity was a priority for the early church. The new Christians were unified; they would fellowship and worship together and share their possessions (Acts 4:32). Before long, though, a problem arose. Ananias and Sapphira sold a piece of property and pledged the full amount to the common fund. Unfortunately, they withheld some of the income and lied about it. This was the first break in the church’s unity (5:1-11).

## PAUL'S INSTRUCTIONS

Years later, Paul in many of his letters had to deal with church unity because internal and external forces were poised to undermine it. He, therefore, devoted much effort to maintaining unity within the fellowship. His letters were meant in part to heal potential rifts that threatened the young church.

Some scholars viewed Paul as regularly encountering the problem caused by proponents of the Law. Jewish legalists could not accept Paul’s teaching that Gentile believers could be saved without following the Law.



Galatians is a perfect example of Paul having to deal with the division the Judaizers created. They taught that to be a Christian, one had to follow Jewish Law. This led Paul to propose a Spirit-centered solution. He reminded them that Christ had freed them from the Law (Gal. 5:1); he then made four related statements about the believer's Spirit-controlled life. He called them to "walk by the Spirit," be "led by the Spirit," "live by the Spirit," and "follow the Spirit" (vv. 16,18,25). Paul emphasized that if believers continued to walk by the Spirit, the Judaizers would not sway them.

In First Corinthians, Paul addressed several situations that threatened church unity. The apostle established the need for unity as a primary purpose for writing, and he made a plea for oneness (see 1 Cor. 1:10). Paul was not trying to impose uniformity; he was concerned, though, that differences might lead to a division that would weaken the church and its mission.

Paul also dealt with developing factions related to those following either Paul, Apollos, Cephas (Peter), or even Christ Himself. Paul did not want these factions to create division, so he presented rhetorical questions to show the Corinthians that their quarreling was foolish. Paul posed the question, "Is Christ divided?" (v. 13). The answer was obvious and restated the need for church unity.

The apostle later compared the human body's unity with that of the church (12:12-30). Paul was responding to a dispute over spiritual gifts, a dispute that threatened to divide. Some Corinthian believers felt superior to their brethren who had gifts the former group considered inferior. Paul explained that all spiritual gifts were necessary for a church to function properly. He challenged his readers: "And I will show you an even better way" (v. 31). This led into chapter 13, where Paul established love as the means of maintaining church unity.

In Ephesians, Paul again had to deal with unity. Some see the problems between Jewish and Gentile Christians as the letter's central theme. In chapter two, the apostle stated that Christ "made both groups one and tore down the dividing wall of hostility" (Eph. 2:14b). He further explained that Christ had overcome any spiritual division between the Jew and the Gentile and described the two as "fellow citizens with the saints, and members of God's household" (v. 19).

In chapter four, the apostle compared the church to the human body, with Christ as the head (4:15). According to Paul, when Christians practice the virtues of humility, gentleness, patience, and have love for one another, they show and maintain the unity of the Spirit (vv. 2-3).

## IMPLICATIONS

Paul gave the churches clear directions concerning unity. He reminded the Galatians they were to be Spirit led. He admonished the Corinthians to love one another. He emphasized to the Ephesians that Christian love was essential for maintaining unity. Similarly, Paul encouraged Christians at Philippi to be like-minded, to love one another, to put other's interests ahead of their own, and to have the same attitude or same way of thinking as Christ (Phil. 2:1-5).

Although Paul gave these instructions about unity to address a problem that plagued the early church, his teachings still apply. If believers today follow the clear teachings of the Scriptures, the church will experience the unity the Lord both desires and expects.

This article originally appeared in the Spring 2015 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. At the time of writing, Michael W. Olewski was the director of missions for the Washington Baptist Association in Chatom, Alabama.

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# ONE KEY TO KEEP FROM QUITTING YOUR CALLING

By *Brandon Hiltibidal*



If you are leading a group, you have answered the call of Jesus to make disciples. He said to you, “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations,” and you said “yes.” At times, it feels like a pleasure. Others times, it feels like a punishment. Sometimes, it is ministry. Sometimes, it is miserable.

Sometimes, it’s both.

That means, of course, that some people quit. Some people fail.

Yes. Some do. But, some people serve with joy until the end of their lives.

We know the kind of disciple makers we want to be—the happy, enduring, forever kind. But, how? How does a disciple maker keep answering the call with joy instead of quitting or crying or caving?

Look to your Caller more than your calling

Consider Peter in Matthew 4.

Jesus said to Peter, Follow me, ... and I will make you fish for people” (v. 19). Jesus called Peter to something outside of himself, a mission that was not focused on himself. He said, “Stop what you are doing, follow Me and give your life to My kingdom.” Immediately, Peter left his net and followed. Peter was made for that calling. Peter wanted that calling. Peter responded to that calling.

Peter even tried for years to walk in that calling. But he could not; he wasn’t strong enough.

In Matthew 26, we learn that Peter failed in his calling. The night Jesus was taken away to be crucified, Peter was afraid to be associated with Jesus. Fearing that he too would be killed, finally realizing that Jesus’ calling was hard, Peter quit—he denied and he ran away to hide.



Until he didn't ...

Now consider Peter in John 21.

Jesus said again to Peter in John 21, "Follow me." He said to Peter the Failure, "Follow me." He said to Peter the Broken, "Shepherd my sheep." Then, he told Peter that one day he would be dressed by another and carried where he did not want to go. The Bible says, "He said this to indicate by what kind of death Peter would glorify God" (see John 21:19).

Jesus told Peter the denier, who had already proven he was not strong enough to continue in his calling, that he would feed His lambs until the end. The disciple who was scared to die as one of the sheep, shepherded the sheep until he was killed for God's glory.

So Peter was a failure. But then, he was a church father. Peter was a quitter. Then, he was a martyr. Peter was a scared disciple who denied, denied, denied. Then he was a shepherd of sheep who served Jesus until he died.

What changed? What happened?

What happened between Matthew 26 and John 21? What happened between Peter's denial and Peter's death that changed the way he lived his calling? What happened that made Peter able to serve from his brokenness instead of surrender to his brokenness?

The cross happened.

There is a cross between Matthew 26 and John 21. There is a Savior between Peter's failure and his victory. For Peter, in John 21, Jesus was no longer just the man who had called him to something bigger than his life; he was the One who loved him so much he gave up His life to give Him forgiveness. Peter saw the love and power of Jesus and it changed him.

Looking to Jesus is the key to continuing in the calling.

Being called to something bigger than our life is not enough. We must be called by Someone stronger than our brokenness. We aren't strong enough to serve. We aren't brave enough to persevere for the sake of the calling alone. We need the joy of the Caller.

Jesus said to Peter, "Do you love me?" He says to us, "Do you love me?"

Yes, but we love because He first loved us. We serve because He first served us. We run after our calling because He ran after His. He was called to us. He was called to death. He was called to resurrection.

We are called to something great. But, we are called by Someone greater. We discover something to give our life to when we discover the One who gave His life for us.

Continuing in His call is a joy.



**Brandon Hiltibidal** is a former church planter and multi-site pastor, and he is now part of the Groups Ministry team at LifeWay Christian Resources. He and his wife have three little girls and lead a community group at The Bridge Church in Spring Hill, Tennessee.

...the resurrection of the dead, and ei  
ent. <sup>3</sup> And we will do this if God per  
or it is impossible to renew to reper  
who were once enlightened, who t  
heavenly gift, became companions with  
Spirit, <sup>5</sup> tasted God's good word and  
s of the coming age, <sup>6</sup> and who have  
because, <sup>b</sup> to their own harm, they  
ifying the Son of God and holding Him  
tempt. <sup>7</sup> For ground that has drunk  
that has often fallen on it, and that pro  
ation useful to those it is cultivated  
es a blessing from God. <sup>8</sup> But if it pro  
s and thistles, it is worthless and abo  
rsed, and will be burned at the end.  
ven though we are speaking this way  
s, in your case we are confident of  
ings connected with the world  
unjust; He will not forget y  
ve<sup>c</sup> you showed for His name with  
d the saints—and you continue to  
<sup>11</sup> Now we want each of you to do  
the same diligence for the real reall  
ur hope, <sup>12</sup> so that you you'll be im  
mitators of those who im  
gh faith and perseverance



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- Session 4** Established > *2 Samuel 7:8-21*
- Session 5** Valued > *2 Samuel 9:1-13*
- Session 6** Accountable > *2 Samuel 12:1-14*
- Session 7** Grieved > *2 Samuel 13:15-20,31-39*
- Session 8** Deposed > *2 Samuel 15:10-16,24-30*
- Session 9** Restored > *2 Samuel 19:1-15*
- Session 10** Averted > *2 Samuel 20:1-2,14-21*
- Session 11** Resolved > *2 Samuel 21:1-6,10-14*
- Session 12** Thankful > *2 Samuel 22:26-36,50-51*
- Session 13** Disciplined > *2 Samuel 24:10-25*

# Paul's Second Missionary Journey



Paul establishes churches in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea

Paul imprisoned

Luke joins Paul

Paul receives vision that encourages him to travel to Macedonia

Paul brought on charges before Gallio

Paul speaks to the Arospagus

Paul asks Timothy to join him in his work

Paul returned from Jerusalem to plan his next venture

Caesarea Maritime Conference, A.D. 40, (Acts 15:1-30; Gal 2:1-21)

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