A STILL MORE EXCELLENT WAY

SMALL GROUPS | 7-WEEK STUDY GUIDE

MORGAN HILL BIBLE CHURCH

VOLUME I • UNITY

A STILL MORE EXCELLENT WAY

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translation of the Holy Bible.

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INTRO

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HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

INTRO

The Apostle Paul arrived in the bustling metropolitan port city of Corinth around AD 52 and planted a community that would become several small house-churches by the time he wrote 1 Corinthians some 4 years later. A Roman colony in ancient Greece, the city was a melting pot of every culture and way of life found in the rest of the Roman empire, and its location as a trading town afforded the Corinthians ample opportunity for rapid economic advancement. This brought with it great disparity in wealth and power, along with a highly sex-driven culture.

Sex. Money. Power. One commentator writes, "All of this evidence together suggests that Paul's Corinth was at once the New York, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas of the ancient world." How were these new Jesus followers supposed to live in a world with radically different outlooks and commitments? How were they to live out the tension of being set-apart for God (see 1 Corinthians 1:2), but never separated from the world to whom they were called to witness (see 1 Corinthians 5:10)? **This study will invite God to speak into our own lives and find "a still more excellent way" (to appropriate Paul's word in 1 Corinthians 12:31) to follow God and allow Jesus to shape our mindset and actions in every place we are called.**

Someone might ask about a text like 1 Corinthians, "Aren't we just reading someone else's mail?!" In one sense, yes. We gain a clearer sense of what's really going on if we first try to observe and interpret ancient texts as the original authors and readers would have understood them. But in a profound sense, no! The Bible is alive, active and relevant to every new generation.

1 Corinthians itself actually demands that we read Scripture as if it was written for 'us.' Twice in the letter, Paul refers to events that occurred 1500 years before his time and says, "This was written for our sake," and, "these things took place as examples for us" (See 1 Corinthians 9:10 and 10:6). In the same way, the Holy Spirit uses these words to speak real and timely truth into our lives and cultures today.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

The introduction to this book is meant to be a detailed overview and training in the "Inductive Bible Study Method" which goes through the Observation, Interpretation, and Application process as our groups meet Jesus in the biblical text. We will rely on the introduction in the sessions that follow, asking you to access it and use the tools there to make your study fruitful and enjoyable. We want this resource to help you and your group grow in vital relationship with Jesus through Scripture as you become more equipped and adept at discovering the truth in God's Word on your own. Ultimately this will help you and your group hear God's voice and know how to apply His Word to your everyday lives. Your first session will invite you to carefully read and take notes throughout this introduction as you begin to dive in to this powerful letter.

Intro to Inductive Bible Study

GOD'S WORD IS ALIVE

The Bible is a collection of 66 books inspired by God and written by over 40 human authors over a span of about 2,000 years. God's Word is available and accessible enough for every child in our MH Kids ministry to experience the love of Christ the first time someone opens the Bible with them, and God's Word is so deep and expansive that it can take a lifetime of intense searching and study to even scratch the surface!

Studying this accessible-yet-expansive book brings up a question of "ends" and "means." We don't study Scripture to become better at "studying Scripture." God has provided the Bible as the means to the end, which is growing in a vital relationship with Jesus.

This is not a new problem. 600 years before Paul wrote the letter to Corinth, the prophet Jeremiah was sent to a people who had mixed their end with their means. The leaders entrusted with mediating God's presence to the people had stopped seeking the Lord, and those tasked with teaching the deep truths of God's Word did not know God themselves (Jeremiah 2:8).

Fast forward 600 years, and Jesus offers a similar warning to the leaders of His day:

> *You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.*
>
> **—Jesus (John 5:39-40)**

We desire to "search the Scriptures" in ways that connect us with our Savior, Jesus. We come to the sacred text with the purpose of growing more and more in a vital relationship with Jesus, learning to respond in faith as we encounter Him. There are many different ways to engage with God's Word. What follows is one of those ways. We have found this method to be great for growing in our love for God through His Word, and it helps create space for the Holy Spirit to direct us toward God's agenda in our lives.

THE INDUCTIVE BIBLE STUDY APPROACH (O.I.A.)

When we study the Bible inductively we want to think of ourselves more like detectives rather than lawyers. Approaching the text like lawyers would mean only looking for parts that support the particular case we want to make. On the other hand, as detectives we are going to look under every stone, try to see everything there is to see, and draw conclusions based on what we find.

Inductive Bible Study utilizes **O**bservation, **I**nterpretation, and **A**pplication, which we abbreviate as OIA. This sequence is an important tool to help us uncover everything that's in the text and allows the Holy Spirit to speak through what we uncover.

Our relationship with God can be incredibly personal and intimate, but it was never meant to be solitary. Some methods of learning from Scripture focus on one individual's thoughts and interpretation, and there is a place for that - listening to a sermon, reading a commentary, or listening to a podcast are all ways that individuals have positively impacted the community of faith (turns out, we actually do need "lawyers" to make very specific arguments hold up!). On the other

hand, using OIA in our small groups allows us to hear from everyone in the room and be shaped and challenged by the ways the Holy Spirit is interacting with all of us together. God works through the unique lives of everyone in our group - our stories, cultures, perspectives, and experiences - and the observations and questions that each unique person can bring will give our study of Scripture more depth and richness. "As iron sharpens iron" goes the proverb, each person in the circle is a gift to the rest of us as we seek to grow in wisdom and understanding God's Word (see Proverbs 27:17).

God's Word is for our *formation*, not our *information*.

We seek a Living God every time we open Scripture, so how could we not walk away changed?

The Nuts and Bolts of Inductive Study

FOR QUICK REFERENCE

The general flow of the meeting will be marked in red. More detailed instructions will be marked in black.

BEFORE THE STUDY

Welcoming, Community Time

About 30 minutes depending on group dynamic; more if there's food

- **Check-in (10-15 minutes).** Usually a time to connect about people's week, and ask about any prayer requests they shared. Some groups spend much more time here, and that's ok!
- **Ice-breaker question (5 min).** Every week we provide an ice-breaker question for your group. Feel free to come up with your own; this is somewhat related to the theme of the text but really has no bearing on the later discussion.
    - A simple ice-breaker might be: *What is the most encouraging thing you witnessed or experienced this week?*
- **Debrief any challenges from last week (10 min).** Once your group has been meeting for a few weeks, it's good to start spending time asking how people are actually applying the text each week. Each study ends with a time of coming up with concrete applications from the text (see below). Debriefing how it went, where people saw God at work, and how they felt about it is a great way to solidify what God said to us and help us grow as disciples.

- **Prayer for the study (2 min).** Invite someone to pray for God's blessing over your group as you open the Word with each other. Since this is about meeting Jesus in the text and allowing the Holy Spirit to guide and speak through each part of the study, it is good to spend some time in prayer acknowledging the Spirit's presence and inviting Him into the conversation.

STEP ONE: OBSERVATION (15-20 MINUTES)

Group time (5 min).
Overview of relevant background and read the biblical text out loud.

Background and Context: Every week, we will include any relevant information to help frame our text in its historical and biblical setting. This might include a conversation about history, genre, definition of key terms, and a look at the surrounding stories. This is by no means an exhaustive study, but hopefully will allow everyone to onramp into the text at the same speed. Framing the text is an initial part of the "observation" stage.

A Bible dictionary, like the one from InterVarsity Press, is a great resource if you desire to research background and context for yourself. Imagine your friends walk into the movie theater 10 minutes late; what will you whisper to them so they could jump in quickly and enjoy the rest of the movie? That's your "frame." The hope is to give enough to quickly orient and inform everyone so we can all begin on the same page.

The text itself will be laid out each week with enough space in between the lines and in the margins for notes. We recommend using multiple colors and highlighters to draw attention to the various observations and questions that are found in the text.

Personal time: study the text (5-10 min).
The Bible was originally written to be *heard*, even more than *read*. That's even more true of a community letter like 1 Corinthians. As you transition to the text, take some time and read the week's passage out loud together. As you hear it being read, start making mental observations about what stands out to you. This will help you transition more easily into the next step of the study process.

Allow 5-10 minutes for everyone, on their own, to underline or circle any key observations in the texts. Initially you might just underline the parts you like, repetition you see, or simply sentences that jump out at you. As you get more comfortable with observation, try and add some of the observation tools on the next page.

Read through the passage slowly and repeatedly and look for new observations. If you are able, read several different translations; you can often pick up nuances and differences in word choice that will alert you to important observations. *This might be suited for a more in-depth study you do at home in preparation for your gathering, but especially if the text is short you can probably still try reading a few translations during this time. There is more information about choosing different Bible translations, and accessing online versions at the end of this introduction.*

On the next page is your "Observation Toolbox" of more in-depth methods of observation. Don't try and master everything at once, but keep coming back to these pages and try them out as you find helpful. Remember, this is still not about coming to any conclusions, or interpretations. These are all tools to help us truly see what is going on, which will aid in the later step of interpretation. There are three categories to look for: Content, Connection, and Experiential.

CONTENT

CHARACTERS

Note both individuals and groups and ways they are described.

Mark 3:31-35 | Jesus contrasts those "standing outside" with those "sitting inside" to teach that, "whoever does the will of God," is a part of Jesus' true family.

RELATIONSHIPS

Note interaction, including dialogue, try and "read between the lines."

2 Samuel 12:1-7 | Nathan's dialogue with David points to some interesting social dynamics about how to call out a guilty party and particularly how one "speaks truth to power."

PLACE & SETTING

Look up geography on a map; note distance between locations, did anything else noteworthy happen in that place?

Mark 6:45-53 | Jesus tells the disciples to sail across the Sea of Galilee to Bethsaida, instead they land at Gennesaret. They don't make it to Jesus' proposed location until Mark 8:22. Why they miss their mark and what happens in between is significant.

ACTION & EVENTS

Note imperatives- who is commanding whom? Note shift in tenses—is this present, past, future? Identify primary and secondary activity—main plot vs. subplots.

Mark 6:14-29 | This whole scene about John the Baptist is in the past tense; why are we reading about it now and how does this flashback relate to what is happening in the rest of the chapter?

TIME REFERENCES

Note length of time passed between action & events.

Genesis 16:16-17:1 | Thirteen years lapse between the birth of Ishmael and the revelation and birth of Isaac. What was it like for Abraham to be told that his plan for Ishmael to be his heir was wrong after all that time? (notice Genesis 16:18 "And Abraham said to God, "Oh that Ishmael might live before you!")

SURROUNDING TEXT

Skim the surrounding chapters and note how this story functions in light of the whole.

Mark 10:46-52 | Blind Bartimaeus. Preceding (Mark 10:35-45), Jesus asks the same exact question in both scenes to James/John and then Bartimaeus—what's contrasted? Immediately following (Mark 11:1-11), Jesus enters Jerusalem to a crowd shouting praises about the "kingdom of David," and Bartimaeus heralded Jesus as the "Son of David."

CONNECTIONS

REPETITION

Look for reiteration of themes, ideas or terms.

2 Samuel 7 | The word "house" is repeated 15 times, contrasting the dream of David to build God a temple ("house) with the purpose of God in establishing David's "house" or legacy.

CONTRAST:

Association of opposites.

John 9:41 | Jesus contrasts seeing and blindness to teach about being guilty or blameless. Galatians 5:19-23 contrasts "works of the flesh" with "fruit of the Spirit."

CONTINUITY

Association of similar things that vary in some way.

Matthew 13 | Jesus teaches seven parables in a row all connected with finding, understanding, entering the Kingdom of God, then Jesus enters Nazareth (verse 53) and is rejected.

GENERAL TO SPECIFIC

Movement from a general idea or activity to particulars about that idea.

Acts 8:1-5 | Persecution scatters the believers, who witness about Jesus wherever they go (see also Acts 1:8), then a close-up on one of those witnesses, Philip, as he preaches in Samaria. The specific story of Philip gives us an idea of the sorts of things happening in the general scattering of believers.

CLIMAX

Arrangement of material in order of increasing importance, force, or effectiveness of expression.

Genesis 1 | Each day God creates something new and says it is "good"; on the 6th day God creates man and woman and looks over everything He has made and this time says, "very good."

REASON

An explanation marked by words such as "for", "because," "since," "as," and "whereas."

Romans 1:1-6, 16-17 | Paul tells us the gospel ("good news") in verses 1-6. Why is Paul not ashamed of this gospel? Answer: it is the power of God for salvation to all who believe; in it the righteousness of God is revealed.

CAUSE TO EFFECT

Consequences of an action, event, or decision.

Luke 4:16-30 | In verse 22, "all spoke well" of Jesus; in verse 29 they are trying to kill him. Jesus' teaching in the intervening verses stirred them to wrath.

INFERENCE

A conclusion based on an event or statement; often indicated by use of "therefore," "wherefore," "consequently," or "accordingly."

Romans 5:1 & 8:1 are two times when Paul brilliantly uses "Therefore." This should force us to read the previous chapter(s) to understand his argument. Inference words help remind us not to take things out of context.

CONDITION

A statement that is only true when something else is true; indicated by "if," "if…then," or "provided that."

Romans 8:31 | "If God is for us, who can be against us?" 1 Timothy 2:11-13 provides four succinct if/then statements with an interesting twist at the end; the conditional sentences lull us with their rhythm only to be jolted awake by the contrast of God's faithfulness.

FORESHADOWING

Predicting or pointing ahead to a future event.

Matthew 10:4 | Whenever Judas is introduced he is "Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus." Even in the middle of the story we are reminded of where Jesus is heading. Genesis 15:12-16 Abraham gets a vision foreshadowing Israel's slavery and exodus from Egypt.

IRONY

Expressing something in a way that usually means the opposite.

2 Corinthians 11:16-33 | Paul brilliantly employs irony in debunking so called "servants of Christ" who are boasting in their own strength and achievement. Instead Paul boasts of beatings, imprisonments, and worse.

DRAMATIC IRONY

When the reader (us) knows more than the characters in the story.

John 11:51 | The narrator tells us that when Caiaphas plotted to murder Jesus he was inadvertently prophesying about the sacrifice and redemption Jesus would bring for the nation. Realizing that we know something Caiaphas does not helps us interpret his motives and understanding.

TENSION

Note opposing goals or clashing interests; anything left unresolved.

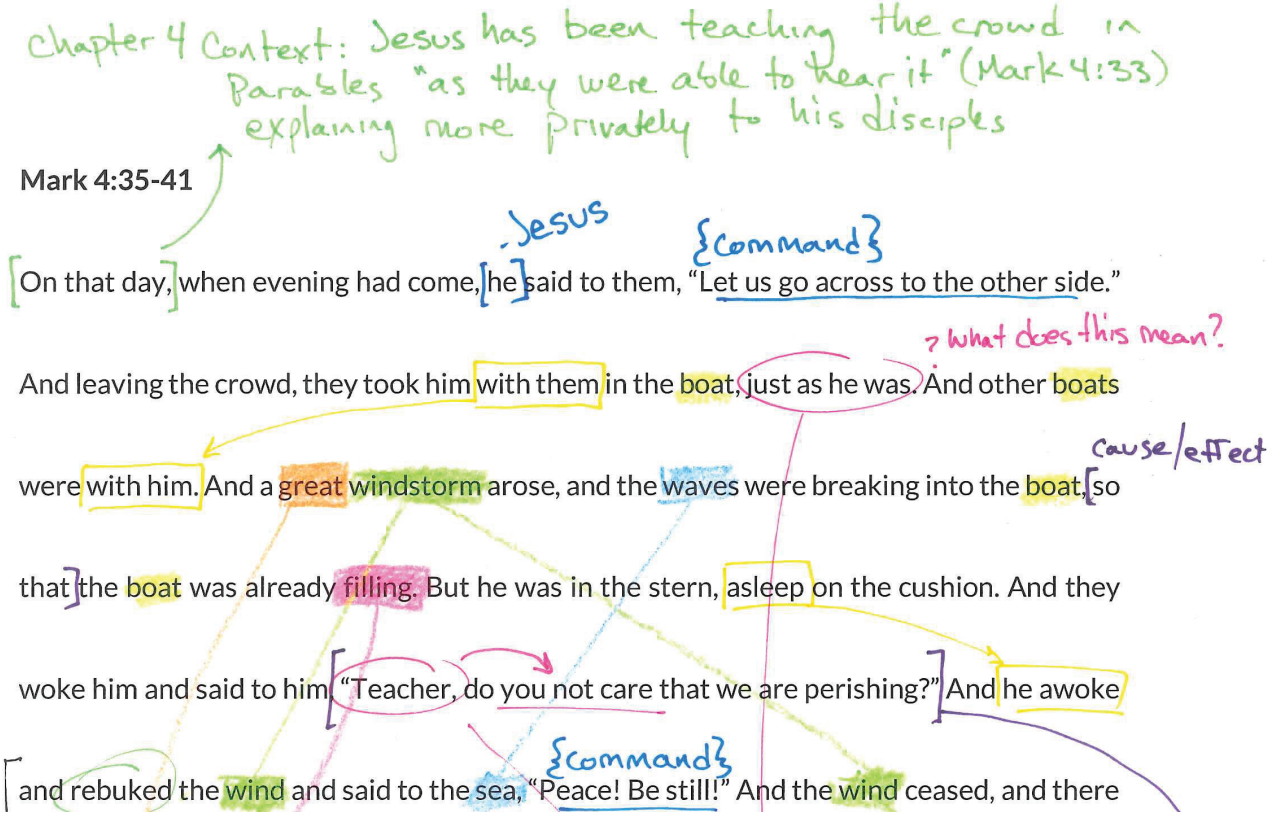
Mark 2:6,16, 24; 3:6 and continuing. The interactions of Jesus with the Jewish leaders reveal a growing tension as they move from questioning, to fully seeking to destroy Jesus. What causes their feeling toward Jesus to grow into all-out hatred?

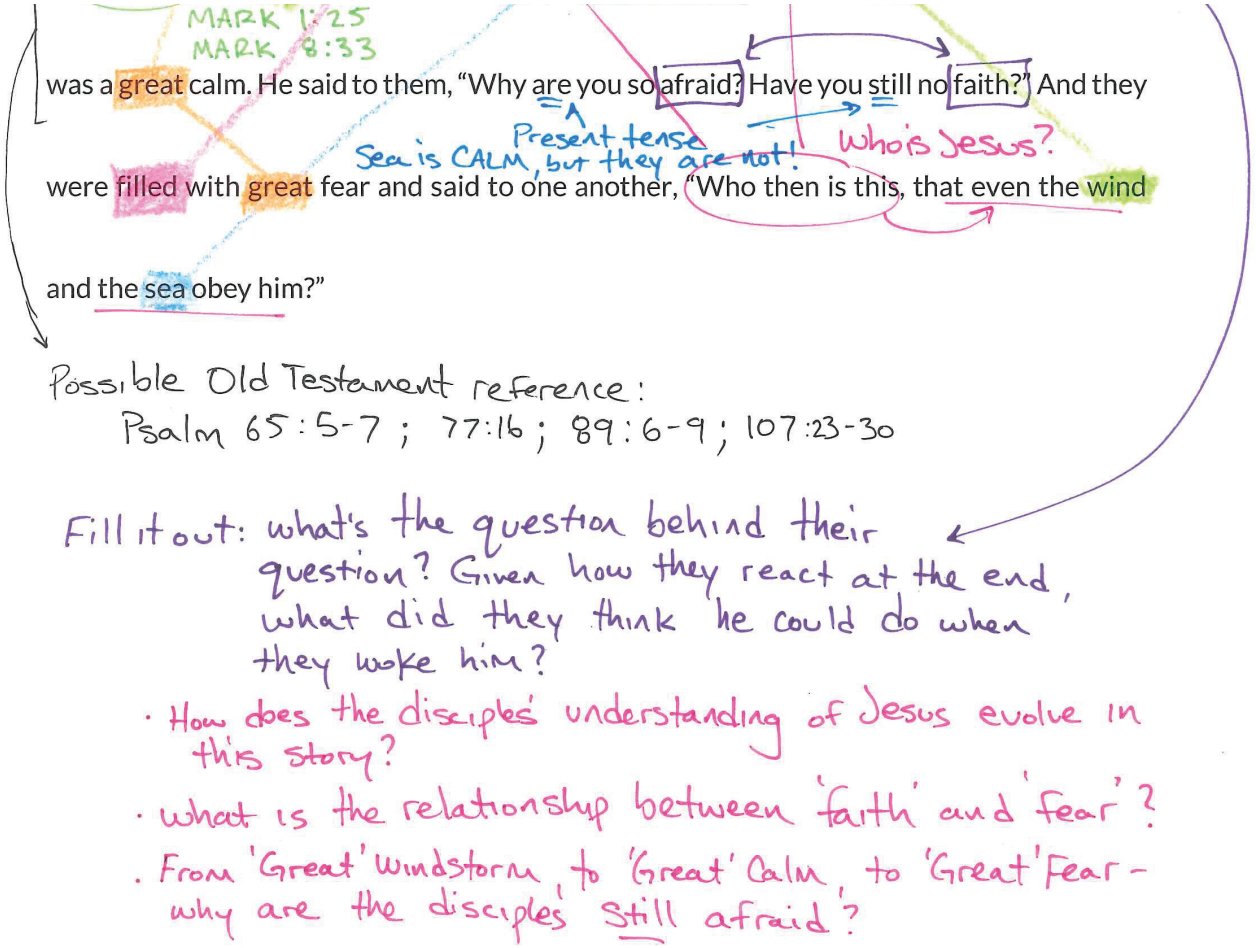
EXPERIENTIAL

Another way to observe is to imagine yourself in the story. Choose a fringe character or a non-speaking role and take opposing sides. Be a disciple, then be a Pharisee; be an Israelite, then a Philistine and experience the story from both sides. What do you feel, what would you do, what do you see? Or be one of the main characters and pretend you're sitting down to write in your journal about what you just experienced. If you were David in the caves (1 Sam. 24), or Peter going out to catch fish (John 21), or Paul in prison (Acts 16) what would you write about in your journal?

An example of what your page could look like is on the next page, utilizing many of the components in the toolbox and improvising a few possible questions that might arise out of our observations.

Observation Toolbox





Observation Toolbox

Group time: sharing our observations (5-10 min).
Spend about 5-10 minutes sharing key observations and things that intrigued you as a group. *(If your group is larger than 7, consider moving into smaller groups of 2-3 during this step so everyone can have a chance to share. There's no agenda to "get it right" during this time. Idea: To help stay focused on "observation" without drifting into interpretation consider beginning your sharing with: "I see repetition in…" "I see contrast…" etc.)*

STEP TWO: INTERPRETATION (30 MINUTES)

Group time: ask questions (5 min).
Use your observations to let your curiosity out. **What questions do you have that would help to unpack the significance and meaning in the text?** Rather than focus on pre-formed questions, we start first with questions that the Holy Spirit has birthed out of your own discussion. As you near the end of your observation time start asking, **"What questions could we ask that might unpack the deeper significance of what's going on here?" "What questions would help us get at the author's intent?"** The great thing about this time is that you can ask questions for which you don't have any answer.

Group time: hone questions (2 min).
Your group might come up with dozens of questions that you won't have time to explore; as a group you can hone your questions down to the ones that you'll try and answer. Repeated or similar questions coming from multiple people is a good indication of which direction to head. Check out this "Interpretation Toolbox" for writing great questions.

INTERPRETATION TOOLBOX

Some questions are not actually about interpretation, are unanswerable, or do not allow for discussion (one-word answers). Good questions promote curiosity, and curiosity provokes fresh ways of thinking. Great questions move a group from confusion to clarity.

Here is a brief overview of some ways to make our question-asking that much better *(examples will be based on Mark 4:35-41 since we used that in our example previously)*

Characteristics of poor questions

(these would slow or kill momentum)

Obvious: Where was Jesus sleeping?

Doesn't require knowledge of the text: Which disicples were fishermen?

Too long or complex: How many times does Jesus make a command, what is the outcome of those commands and how are they different?

Irrelevant: How big was the crowd that they left?

Unclear: What's up with Jesus?!

Limited answer (e.g. "yes", "no", "the disciples"): What do they call Jesus in line 5?

Socratic (Series of easily answered questions used to lead to a point): What adjective was used to describe the windstorm? > What adjective was used to describe the "calm"? > What adjective was used for the disciples' fear?

Can't be answered by the text: Who was in the other boats?

Rhetorical: Isn't Jesus powerful?!

Some of these questions are actually observation questions and if people still have observation questions that's perfectly fine to briefly answer if there is time. Other questions might veer toward application too soon, in which case your group might want to wait until it's time for application. Many of the questions in the list above could be adapted into great questions by utilizing the TIGHT acronym:

Great questions are **TIGHT**:

promote
Text-dependent
Interesting
Group discussion
Highlight tensions
Tie observations or sections together

One easy way to make a great interpretation question is to state your observation and say, *"What's the significance?" "I see all this repetition, why is that significant?" or "What significance does this particular tension bring?"*

Example: rather than asking the Socratic questions above, just state the observation and turn it into a question. "We see a repetition of the adjective "great." First a **great** storm, then a **great** calm, then after the storm is past, the disciples have **great** fear? Why are they afraid? What are they afraid of?

When we read Scripture, the first and foremost reason is to learn more about our triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We want to ask questions that help us know God and grow in a vital relationship with Him. One question you can ask of any text is: What does this text reveal about the character and heart of Jesus?

Share your questions out loud (no answers yet!). Try and group the questions together and come up with the top 5 or 6 that you think will best unpack what the author was trying to communicate. In each week's study we will still provide a few questions you might want to look at, but feel free to focus exclusively on your own!

Group time: answer questions (15-20 min).
Now let's spend time looking for answers to the top questions your group landed on. We want to explore what the original intent and significance of the text is before turning to application, which is what the text might say to us today. It is easy to stray into opinions or things we've heard before so help keep each other in interpretation-mode by asking, *"Where do we see that in the text?"*

Group or individual time: write a summary statement (1-2 min).
Summarize: Before we move to application, try and summarize what your group talked about in a few sentences. Then spend some time trying to offer a title sentence for the stories we looked at. If you were asked to provide the subtitle for this section by the publisher of your Bible, what core message would you write? In other words: what do you think the author hoped the original audience would get from this text? You can do this all at once, or give time for each person to write down their own reflection.

STEP THREE: APPLICATION (5-10 MINUTES)

Group time: brainstorm a concrete application.
A good application starts with God. The Bible is first and foremost a story about God, who He is, and what He is up to. Flowing from that, application allows the biblical text to speak into our concrete lives. It calls us into action and allows the Holy Spirit to connect the dots from what we are reading to our real lives, relationships, and decisions. Write and answer your own application question in a way that calls you to respond to the text in your own life this week.

APPLICATION TOOLBOX

An application should flow from the text you just studied and the interpretation your group landed on. It will be an extension of the aspect of God's character revealed this week.

Think about some active response that will tangibly express the application this week. It might be a public action of mission or service, it might be committing to have a conversation with

someone, it might be a tangible spiritual practice like journaling. Try and vary the types of responses your group lands on to make sure you're not getting into a rut. These can also vary in whether you engage an application as individuals throughout the week, or go somewhere together and apply the text as a group. There's no limit to the ways we can apply God's Word in our everyday lives. *(An example might be: You're studying Jesus' words on 'loving your neighbor' in Luke 10:25-37; you come up with very concrete ways your group can actually do that this week!)*

Be ready to come back next time and debrief how your application went. If your group felt God challenging you to apply your faith somehow, it makes perfect sense to allow some level of accountability! *"How did it go? What was awkward or difficult? How did you see God show up as you took that risk?"* are all great questions to consider as you come back the next week. **A good rule of thumb: if you can't figure out how to debrief, it might not have been an application.** *(In other words, if you ended your group with too vague or too abstract of an idea it might be difficult for your group to know how they were even supposed to tangibly apply anything!)*

Finally, all this does not mean that everyone needs to apply the text in the same way. It is helpful as a group to discuss some ways of making the text concrete in our lives, but it might be appropriate to individually come up with your own specific response. What is risky and faith-building for one might not be for another. What's important is that you seek to make things clear and try and follow-up the next week and encourage one another toward growth and transformation. Of course, sometimes the most risky thing to do would be to apply the text as a group in a joined act of worship and/or service.

Feeling stuck?
Every week we will also offer an idea for an application. It will follow the guidelines above and give some sort of tangible, concrete way to apply the text each week. *This is only a suggestion!* Perhaps this will get your creative juices flowing and your group can tweak what we offer and make it even better. Or your interpretation time might lead you on a completely different track, in which case go with the application that flows better from your own conversation.

Spiritual Practice
Each week this series will offer a spiritual practice that you can consider applying to your daily and weekly rhythm that will encourage us all to keep growing in vital relationship with Jesus.

Prayer Requests (5 min)
Write down any prayer requests from your group, including any concrete actions people shared that they want to take in response to this week's discussion so that you can continue to support one another through prayer.

- Having now been introduced to the Inductive method of Bible study, what most excites you about this approach?
- What is confusing or challenging about this process?
- What commitments and group dynamics will your group agree to as we start another session?

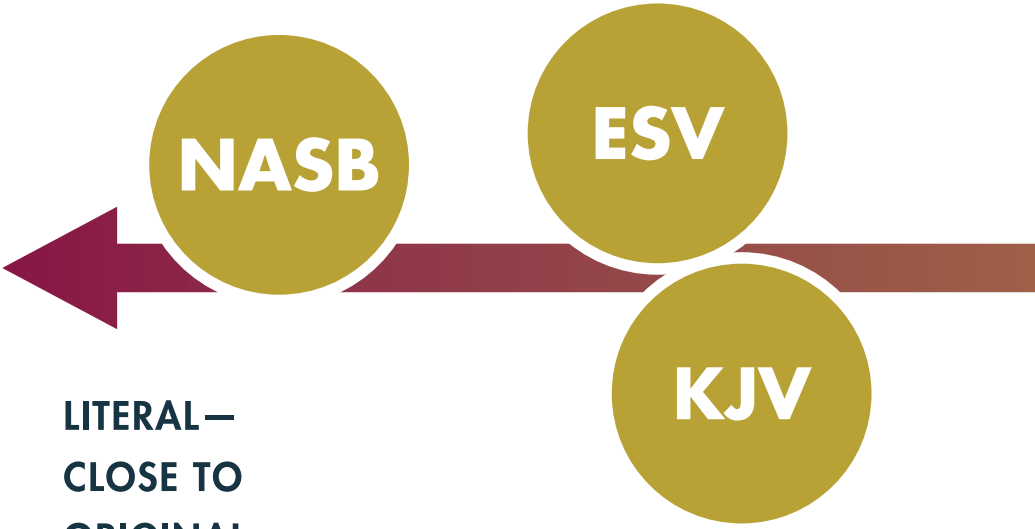
Using Different Translations of the Bible.

Using different translations of the Bible can provide you with different perspectives and ways of understanding the same text. Try comparing different translations of the same passage. Greek and Hebrew are the original languages of Scripture. There are often words or sentence structures that don't easily translate to English. Translators have two choices to make: How close to the original text do I force my translation vs. how readable do I make my translation? Each translation we have today was made by committed scholars who decided to make their translation land somewhere on the scale of readable and literal (see chart on next page).

YouVersion
YouVersion is a digital application for your mobile devices, and provides access to every translation of the Bible and even makes it easy to make notes right on your device.

Biblegateway.com
Biblegateway.com is a popular and widely respected online resource with every translation of the Bible available to you.

Commonly Used



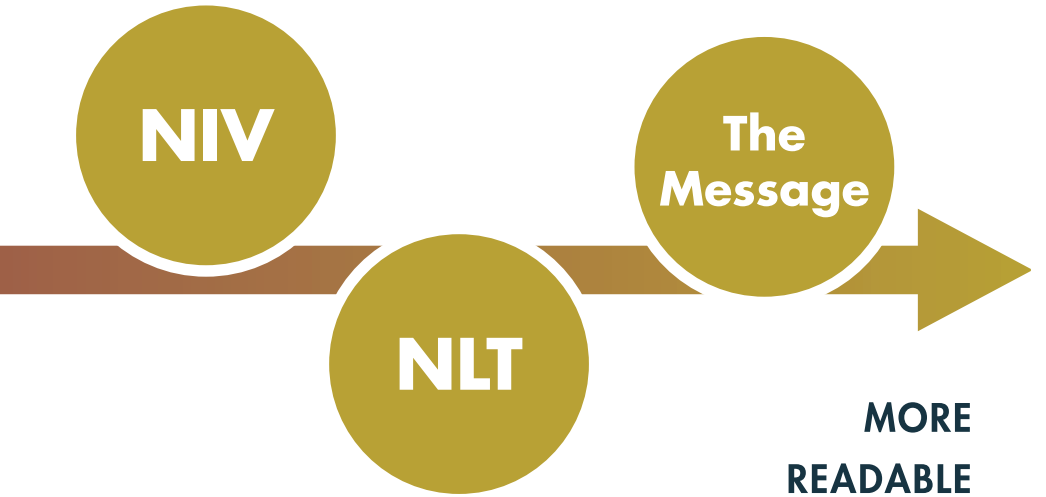
LITERAL—
CLOSE TO
ORIGINAL

NASB
New American Standard Bible

ESV
English Standard Version

KJV
King James Version

Translations of the Bible



NIV
New International Version

NLT
New Living Translation

The Message
Modern day paraphrase

SESSION ONE

29

CALLED WITH A PURPOSE

SESSION ONE

CALLED WITH A PURPOSE

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

This first study will walk your group step-by-step back through the introduction. Take notes as you go. In future sessions, the introduction and the notes you've made there will become a valuable tool in your own growth as a learner and doer of God's Word!

Getting Started

Turn back to page 4 and read through the first two sections ("God's Word is Alive" and "The Inductive Bible Study Approach")

OBSERVATION

Read through "Step 1: Observation" (pages 8-9). The "Observation Toolbox" (pages 8-18) is your resource for more in-depth study; you may want to create a tab in your book for easy access.

Background and Context

This week's background also includes an overview to the letter as a whole. Give a little more time for everyone to read through the background.

INTRODUCTION TO CORINTHIANS AS A WHOLE

Several questions come into play whenever we read different biblical texts. What is the wider biblical setting, how does this fit in with the rest of the Bible? What type of literature (genre) are we looking at: history, poetry, letter, prophecy? What is the geographical and cultural context of the author and original recipients? What was the purpose of this writing: to encourage, reprimand, inform?

Biblical Setting

The Apostle Paul planted the church in Corinth in Acts 18. He continued to stay in touch with the church; the letter itself points to at least two previous letters we do not have. 1 Corinthians 5:9-11 speaks of a letter written by Paul, 7:1 mentions a letter Paul received from the Corinthians. Part of the reason for 1 Corinthians is to address questions from their previous correspondence.

The letter is filled with Old Testament quotations and allusions; three widely utilized Old Testament books are Deuteronomy, Isaiah, and Malachi. Paul places the Corinthians firmly within the continuing story of Israel and God's plan in the Old Testament. Whenever we find an Old Testament reference, it is safe to assume that Paul has the entire context of that reference in mind.

Genre

The genre of 1 Corinthians is a letter (or epistle). One commentator describes, "It is important to bear in mind that all of the letters of the [New Testament] are occasional writings. They were written by particular people for specific reasons and addressed to distinct audiences within a unique historical and cultural setting." When we read the letters of the New Testament, we are "listening in" on one side of a

conversation, and sometimes it's helpful to try and "read between the lines" to attempt to find out what the other side of the conversation might have been.

In some ways it's easier to do OIA with an historical narrative. There is a more obvious plot line with character interaction, drama, and movement. With a letter, we attempt to find the plot where it's not explicitly drawn. We still want to know about tension and drama and connections, but usually have to dig a little. The background before each week's text is one place to find some of the context that might help us locate this letter within its wider story.

Location

Acts 18 describes a Jewish presence in Corinth; Crispus was a ruler of the Jewish synagogue who came to believe in Jesus (Acts 18:8). There was also a large Gentile presence in the church; Acts 18:1-6 reaffirms Paul's focus on the Gentiles, 1 Corinthians 12:2 shows an example of Paul focusing his letter toward Gentiles. As a port city founded by Rome, Corinth was a place of diverse culture and economic advancement. Another commentator writes, "As often happens in such centers, vice and religion flourished side by side." There were many sites to the gods of Greece and Rome. Alongside—and sometimes incorporated into these cultic sites—was a famous culture of sexual promiscuity. Long before Paul's day, to "act like a Corinthian" was a euphemism for "committing fornication."

Purpose

Many have seen 1 Corinthians 1:10 as a central verse of the letter: "I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment." Divisions and factions

among believers was a concern for Paul as he wrote this letter and Paul needed to address these head-on (see 1 Corinthians 1:12-17 for an initial summary).

In addition to unity, the church needed to be called out in the ways they were engaging and witnessing to the wider world, without conforming to the patterns of that world. Richard Hays, a modern Paul scholar, says that Paul believed the Corinthians needed a "conversion of imagination" to start seeing the world through a gospel-shaped lens: "[Paul] invites them to see the world in dramatically new ways, in light of values shaped by the Christian story. Many of the problems at Corinth were caused by the Corinthians' understandable tendency to think and act in ways that were entirely normal within the cultural world of the Greco-Roman city."

The letter also calls the church to prepare for the return of Christ (see 1 Corinthians 1:8). This future-oriented vision of Jesus' rule and our ultimate resurrection (see chapter 15) shape the present outlook and actions of the church. While more themes and truths will come out of our detailed study of 1 Corinthians, unity of Christ's body, engagement with surrounding culture, and hope for the future return of Christ are all just as relevant and powerful today as in Paul's day.

Contextual Notes for 1 Corinthians 1:1-9

When Paul writes a letter (13 letters from Paul are found in the New Testament), it is always good to pay close attention to his opening remarks. These are not throw-away sentences that we can skip to get to the "good stuff." Rather, Paul intentionally crafts these opening greetings, thanksgivings and prayers to set up much of the themes and tone he wants to convey throughout the rest of the letter. Each of his letters follows a basic pattern, but he changes and nuances each greeting to fit the purpose of each specific letter.

"Our Brother Sosthenes" It seems likely that this is the same Sosthenes that appears in Acts 18:17. If that is the case, he would have been the synagogue ruler in Corinth after Crispus. At some point Sosthenes believed in Jesus and, by the writing of this letter some four years after being in Corinth, was working alongside Paul in Ephesus. His mention at the start of this letter may have meant that he was the scribe who wrote down Paul's dictated letter; he may also have been the bearer of this letter, and possibly the first to read and expound the contents to the church.

"The Day of the Lord" Paul here uses a common Old Testament image of "The Day" when God will return to judge the people and those not found blameless will be destroyed. For Paul, "the Lord" is none other than Jesus. Old Testament references include: Amos 5:18, Isaiah 61:1-4, and Joel 2:28-32.

Study the Text

Using the material in "Personal Time: Study the Text" (page 9), observe the text below. Consult the "Observation Toolbox" (pages 8-18) for ways to dig deeper. After you've completed the "sharing observations" section as a group (page 18) move on to Interpretation.

1 CORINTHIANS 1:1-9

[1]Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes, [2]To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: [3]Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. [4]I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, [5]that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge— [6]even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you— [7]so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, [8]who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. [9]God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

INTERPRETATION

Read through "Step 2: Interpretation." Consult the "Interpretation Toolbox" (pages 19-21). Space is provided below to write down your group's top questions.

Some optional questions you might consider using:

- *What is significant about the ways Paul uses the word "called"?*
- *What is significant about how Paul defines himself and this community?*
- *Based on this introduction, what do you think we could expect to find in this letter?*
- *What is being revealed about God the Father and Jesus Christ?*

Summary and Core Message:

APPLICATION

Read the instructions and consult the "Application Toolbox" (pages 22-24) for coming up with concrete ways to apply this text to our lives this week. Write down your plan for applying this text below.

Feeling stuck?
You might consider the following application:

"I give thanks to my God always…"

> *"A capacity to be thankful in the midst of hard times requires acknowledging that we do not know the whole story, that we are living before it is complete, and that we are thankful of the presence of God and faithful persons in our lives. Gratitude is a crucial way in which death and destruction do not have the final word, and cannot finally define us."*
>
> *—Christine Pohl*

It's so easy to let circumstances, people, missed opportunities, or unrealized dreams steal all our attention and energy. Throughout this letter, Paul will express his frustration with the Corinthian church, but he chooses to start by looking at them through a lens of gratitude toward God.

List every specific thing Paul is thankful for in verses 4-9. Now write down the ways you are thankful to God for what He is doing in **your** life, and **your** community. Note how Paul thanks God instead of the Corinthians themselves. **This week, look for a way to highlight what God is doing through someone else. Tell at least one person each day how you are thankful to God for what He is up to in their lives.** *(You can still thank them directly! But Paul is also giving us some good theology about the true end of our gratitude being in God alone.)*

Spiritual Practice

Letters like 1 Corinthians were written for the entire community and would have been read out loud in one sitting, to be studied in more detail later. **Set aside time this week to read through the entire letter of 1 Corinthians in one sitting.** Invite the Holy Spirit into your time and seek to gain a general insight into the flow and feel of the letter, and any major themes or key verses that stick out to you. If you were in that first audience in Corinth as Paul's letter was being read aloud, what would you take to heart?

Prayer Requests

SESSION TWO

CALLED TOGETHER

SESSION TWO

CALLED TOGETHER

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Getting Started

How did you first get connected to the community at Morgan Hill Bible Church?

OBSERVATION (PAGES 8-18)

Background

"I appeal to you, brothers" - Gender and Pronouns in the New Testament: In the original languages of the Bible, (Greek for the New Testament and Hebrew for the Old Testament) when addressing a group of mixed company, one would simply use the male gendered term "brothers" or "men," etc. (sort of like our colloquial "you guys"). There was no implication that the women were being "left out," it was just how the language worked. When Paul says, "brothers" in verse 10 and throughout this letter, he means "brothers and sisters." The ESV translation wants to keep the text as close to the original as possible, and so does not add "and sisters."

This is also a good time to remind ourselves that many of the pronouns (you/your, etc.) are ambiguous in English in terms of number, but the

Greek text makes it clear whether Paul is addressing "you" singular, or "you" plural (think "y'all"). A good rule of thumb is to assume, especially in a communal letter like 1 Corinthians, that all occurrences of "you" are in fact the plural "you all."

Contextual Notes for 1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Who's who:

- **Chloe** is only mentioned here in all of Scripture. Apparently through "her people" Paul found out about these divisions, and it's likely that naming her would have carried some weight with the church for Paul to mention this.
- **Apollos** was a leader in the early church who ministered in some of the same areas as Paul. Acts 18:24-19:6 gives us some of the most relevant background for Apollos. There is no notion of an actual dispute between the two men (see for instance 1 Corinthians 16:12—there is a difference of agenda, but no hostility).
- **Cephas** is the Apostle Peter's Aramaic name (Peter is Greek for "Rock").
- **Crispus** was the Jewish synagogue leader in Acts 18:8 who became Christian.
- **Gaius** is mentioned again by Paul in Romans 16:23 as hosting a church in his house; he must have been a wealthy patron in Corinth who came to believe in Jesus.
- **The house of Stephanas** is mentioned again in 1 Corinthians 16:16-18 as among the "first converts" in the region. Paul clearly sees them as leaders, and Stephanas himself came to visit Paul in Ephesus where he was writing this letter.

Baptism is an outward sign of our inner transformation in Jesus; it represents our acceptance of the death and resurrection of Christ in our own lives (we "die" under the water and are "raised" to our new life in Christ). Here are a few key verses if you want to read up on what the Bible says about baptism: Ezekiel 36:25–26; Matthew 3:11–17; Matthew 28:19; Acts 2:38–41; Romans 6:4; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Hebrews 10:22.

1 CORINTHIANS 1:10-18

10 I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. 11 For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my

brothers. [12]What I mean is that each one of you says, “I follow Paul,” or “I follow Apollos,” or “I follow Cephas,” or “I follow Christ.” [13]Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? [14]I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, [15]so that no one may say that you were baptized in my name. [16](I did baptize also the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) [17]For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. [18]For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

INTERPRETATION (PAGES 19-21)

Some optional questions you might consider using:

- *How does this text build off of last week's opening?*
- *In light of what you know so far, if you were one of "Chloe's people" how would you describe to Paul the problem in this church in your own words?*
- *What does Paul mean by "Is Christ divided?"*
- *What is significant about the way Paul contrasts "words of eloquent wisdom" with "the word of the cross"?*

Summary and Core Message:

APPLICATION (PAGES 22-24)

Feeling stuck?
You might consider the following application:

There are three crucial elements to the life of faith that Paul talks about again and again in his letters: *holiness* (verse 2), *unity* (verse 10), and *God's mission for His people and the world* (verse 1, 7, 17).

Pursuing just one of these elements is comparatively easy *if we're willing to throw away the other two.* But to be on God's mission, within His unified body, while remaining set-apart in holiness is incredibly difficult. Indeed, it is impossible without God's Spirit.

> As a church, we want to be a part of a tipping movement that makes the hope of Jesus so real that in 10 years, over 10% (double the current 5%) of our South Valley is compelled to connect into a vital relationship with Jesus Christ.

Tipping the culture is going to require unity across hundreds of churches to reach that many people for Christ. What can we do now in our own lives and community that will foster the holy, united culture that God can use to tip the rest of this valley?

Pursue Holiness: what ways are you being called to pursue holiness? Are there lifestyle choices, thought patterns, actions in your own life that are not honoring to God or are not leading to a vital relationship with Jesus? Talk to a trusted friend and make a plan to pursue holiness in those areas and invite the Holy Spirit into those decisions.

Pursue Unity: Are there any relationships in your life or among your groups that are strained? Are there any tangible ways this week you can become a catalyst for greater unity and community?

Spiritual Practice

Meditate and pray through Psalm 1 several times this week. What words or images stick in your mind? What are you learning about God and about being in relationship with Him? Bring these to God in prayer.

Prayer Requests

SESSION THREE

GOD'S FOLLY

SESSION THREE

GOD'S FOLLY

1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5

Getting Started

Who is the wisest person you know? Why do you think so?

OBSERVATION (PAGES 8-18)

Background

An onramp into this next section can be seen in the connection of verse 17 and 18. The ESV translation in v.17 says "words of eloquent wisdom," but Paul wrote with even more precision here: He claimed to be sent not with a "wise word" (v. 17), but with the "word of the cross" (v. 18).

Throughout 1 Corinthians 1-4 Paul is addressing the unity between the house church communities in Corinth. This section seems to sideline that issue while Paul lays out some foundation on which he will later build. It would be helpful to keep the unity theme in mind while diving into this current section.

Contextual Notes for 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5

"The wise" seems to refer to the ancient Greek philosophers and thinkers, and **"The scribe"** was the term 1st century Jews used to describe their teachers of the Law (i.e 'Bible teachers'). Notice throughout this whole section how Paul confronts both Greek and Jewish notions of wisdom and power.

For Paul, there were basically only two ethnic groups: Jew and Greek, the term "gentile" was a generic term that could refer to all the nations/ethnic groups, and for our text "Greek" and "gentile" are synonymous.

"A stumbling block to the Jews" The word Paul uses here is *scandalon* (where we get the word "scandal), and it denotes something that causes offense, that "scandalizes." Many Jews in Paul's day were waiting for God to send a Messiah, a King who would vanquish their enemies, heal the people, restore the boundary of Israel, and establish God's Kingdom on earth. Imagine you were a Jew with that hope, and Paul started announcing: *"Good news! The true King of the Jews was crucified by our enemy (and he didn't even put up a fight!); who wants to join?"* Why would you be deeply offended by this message?

"Folly to Gentiles" The gospel was viewed as equally ridiculous by the rest of the world. Everyone in Rome knew that being crucified meant you were a criminal, a rebellion leader who lost to the might of Rome. Rejoicing in the cross would be like a new religion today wearing little electric chairs or gas chambers around their necks. What's more, the gentiles had no belief in any sort of "bodily resurrection." Sure, there were fertility gods and gods of the seasons that seemed to go through a sort of annual "resurrection," but no gentile thought this would ever happen to a human being within history.

We see a glimpse of the gentile reaction in Acts 17:32 with the Athenians response to Paul: "Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, "We will hear you again about this." Pliny the Younger (AD 61-112) shows how "foolish" the Greeks thought the Christians were. In his letters to the Emperor Trajan he describes Christians as "atheists" and "incestuous cannibals" because of the rumors that they refused to worship the pantheon of gods, greeted one-another with a "holy kiss" and consumed the body of Jesus! Ultimately he concluded that the Jesus-Way was nothing but "a disgusting, fanatical superstition."

Verse 1:19: Review Isaiah 29:13-24 for more context.

Verse 1:31: Review Jeremiah 8:3-9:26 for more context.

Verse 2:3: Review Acts 18:9-11 for possible connection.

1 CORINTHIANS 1:18-2:5

[18]For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. [19]For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." [20]Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? [21]For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. [22]For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, [23]but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, [24]but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. [25]For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. [26]For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise

according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. [27]But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; [28]God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, [29]so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. [30]And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, [31]so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord." (2:1) And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. [2]For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. [3]And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, [4]and my speech and my message were not in plausible words

of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, [5]so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

INTERPRETATION (PAGES 19-21)

Some optional questions you might consider using:

- *How is Paul defining and redefining the Corinthian understanding of "wisdom," and "power" in light of his central message? How does this confront the sources of wisdom and power in our world today?*
- *According to Paul, why did God "choose" the Corinthians, and what is their role in God's plan?*
- *What is significant about how Paul describes his own role in God's plan?*
- *What is revealed about the nature and content of God's power?*
- *What are you learning about Jesus' identity?*

Summary and Core Message:

APPLICATION (PAGES 22-24)

Feeling stuck?
You might consider the following application:

"For consider your calling…"

Paul wrote and reminded the church of their own story about being calling by God into His big story. An essential part of telling others about Jesus is sharing your story. This might be the story of how you first came to have faith in Christ, or it might be a way God has acted in your life this week. If you're still checking out Jesus, this might be a chance to reflect on the ways you have seen Jesus move in your life, even if you wouldn't consider yourself a "follower."

We can share formally before a large group or casually in a one-on-one conversation. Either way, the more prepared we are, the better. Take time this week to prepare a 3-5 minute testimony that you will seek to share with others. Use the outline below as a *guide*, but adapt as desired.

- Briefly describe your life before Jesus moved in your life. Again, this might be referring to the moment when you first started following Him, or to something more recent where you experienced God concretely.

- Describe how you decided to trust and commit to Jesus. Or how you are growing more in trusting Him.

- How has your life changed since your encounter with Jesus? In what ways do you have hope and purpose for the future?

- End with an encouragement or challenge for your audience. (This could be a new idea for you. Often we tell our stories with no sense of challenge or invitation. It seems that Paul would have us think about our testimonies as an active part of God's plan to show off His "foolish wisdom.")

Remember, your testimony is both about telling your story and influencing your audience. Say only what you need to say, and tell it in a way that is engaging without exaggerating or bending the truth. Be real. Practice with your group and start asking God who you could share your story with. Pray for those people and for an opportunity to share. Remember that your story should be appropriate for your audience; avoid words that only Christians understand and highlight parts of your testimony that might appeal most to your listeners.

Spiritual Practice

Memorize verses 22-24 this week:

> [22]For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, [23]but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, [24]but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

Take time to meditate on every word of this core message. Reflect on the ways that the gospel continues to be both offensive and ridiculous to many in our world. How does Christ being the "power and wisdom of God" impact you? How is God challenging you to make "Christ crucified" the central thing in your life?

Prayer Requests

SESSION FOUR

GOD'S WISDOM

SESSION FOUR

GOD'S WISDOM

1 Corinthians 2:6-16

Getting Started

What is the thing that most distracts you?

OBSERVATION (PAGES 8-18)

Background

God's upside-down wisdom: Up until now, Paul has alluded to the *content* of God's wisdom several times:

> **1 Corinthians 1:23-24** "but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."
>
> **1 Corinthians 1:30** "And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption."
>
> **1 Corinthians 2:2** "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified."

However, the main emphasis of the previous paragraphs seems to be in the *delivery method* for this "wisdom"— the preaching of the Word (1:18-25), the testimony of the believers (1:26-31), and the witness of Paul (2:1-5). In this section, Paul shifts to emphasize once more the *content* of the message itself, as well as how that content is *received*.

Contextual Notes for 1 Corinthians 2:6-16

The "ages" of world history: For some Greek philosophers, like the Stoics, world history consisted of an endless cycle of repeating loops. Jewish thought had a more linear approach to history: God created the world out of nothing, the "present age" was full of sin and unjust rulers, at some point in the future ("the Day of the LORD") God would act decisively to defeat the corrupt rulers of the world, do away with sin, and establish Israel as God's holy nation over the world. *The "age to come" would bring an end to the "present age."*

But Jesus brought something no one was expecting! His resurrection *in the middle* of the present age meant that the rulers and authorities of this age were rendered ultimately powerless, and that the "age to come" *had in some way already begun*. But the present age rumbles on right alongside this new age inaugurated by Jesus. Theologians have been using the phrase "already and not yet" to describe this phenomenon. The new age is *already here*, but it is also *not yet* fully realized.

Secret Wisdom: The Greek word Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 2:7 for "secret" is *mysterion* ("mystery"). This word was used by Greek mystery cults to refer to a special status of enlightenment achieved by only worthy initiates; in our usage today, a "mystery" might be defined as a secret for which no answer can be found. Neither of these definitions fit with New Testament usage. Paul was not creating an elite class of Christians, and he believed that this mystery was always intended to be made known.

Verse 9: Review Isaiah 64:1-12 for more context.

Verse 16: Review Isaiah 40:1-31 for more context.

Keep the whole letter in mind: It's always good to remind ourselves that these letters were originally read all at once. Paul is building on words and themes he has written about earlier. Two examples:

- Paul's earlier usage of wisdom (1:17-2:5) is deepened and clarified in our text below.
- In 1:10, Paul urged them to have the same "mind," and in 2:16 says that we have the "mind of Christ."

1 CORINTHIANS 2:6-16

6 Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a
wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass
away. 7 But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God
decreed before the ages for our glory. 8 None of the rulers of this age
understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord
of glory. 9 But, as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor

the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him"— [10]these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. [11]For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. [12]Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. [13]And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. [14]The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. [15]The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. [16]"For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ.

INTERPRETATION (PAGES 19-21)

Some optional questions you might consider using:

- *Why does Paul want to emphasize that he does impart "wisdom"? (take into account everything he's said about wisdom up till now)*
- *Verse 8 - Why would the rulers not have "crucified the Lord of glory" had they understood God's wisdom?*
- *What is significant about the Spirit's role?*
- *What might it mean to have the mind of Christ?*
- *What is revealed about God's character?*

Summary and Core Message:

APPLICATION (PAGES 22-24)

Feeling stuck?
You might consider the following application:

In our world today, many people cling to a general notion of "spirituality" that has nothing to do with a connection to a personal god, but more about their own pursuits of knowledge and purpose. But for Paul, to be "spiritual" is to be called into being by the one Creator God, to be taught by His Spirit, and to have the mind of our crucified and risen Lord, Jesus Christ.

Create space this week to listen to God. Prayer does not have to simply be a monologue of us praying at God, but can become a dialogue where we allow God space to answer, and even dictate the content of our prayers.

Start by asking God something specific, try one of the following:

> "God what word or image of encouragement do you have right now for _____(insert someone's name, or the specific situation you're going through)?"
>
> "God what should I be praying about right now?" (allow God to lead you into what topics you should pray for)

God has already spoken His clearest word through His Son, Jesus (Hebrews 1:1-2), and through His written Word, the Bible. God desires to speak to us directly, but nothing He says will diverge from what has been revealed in His Word.

Spend a few moments in silence and listen for an answer to your inquiry, don't discount anything at first—God meets us in our personality style:

- INTUITIVE STYLE: What are you sensing or feeling?
- CONCRETE STYLE: What is going through your mind? What was the first thought that came?
- VISUAL: What images came to mind?
- AUDITORY: What did you hear?
- KINESTHETIC: What are you feeling?

Ask God to clarify the meaning. Ask for any Scripture passages that might help clarify what you heard. God doesn't operate with us in a vacuum. The Bible and Christian community are two crucial ways we can make sure we're growing in hearing God, rather than simply our own voice or the enemy's.

God's motivation is love. His character is one of grace. You might feel convicted, but never shamed—if you're hearing words of shame, fear, hatred, condemnation, or things of that nature, THAT IS NOT GOD!

Write down what you're hearing. If there is an action point God is inviting you into, do it! Come back to what you've written in a week or so and see if God has either answered your prayers, or given you more clarity.

Spiritual Practice

Read slowly through the passages in 1 Corinthians we have already covered. Ask God to speak to you through His Word, what verses or words jump out at you? Ask God why those words in particular are standing out to you. Ask God what ways He would have you pray in response to those words. Ask Him if there are specific people you can pray for and do so.

Prayer Requests

SESSION FIVE

77

BABIES AND BUILDINGS

SESSION FIVE

BABIES AND BUILDINGS

1 Corinthians 3:1-17

Getting Started

What is one of your gifts or talents that you feel most excited to exercise?

OBSERVATION (PAGES 8-18)

Background

As we begin Chapter 3, we realize that Paul has not forgotten the problem of unity he brought up in Chapter 1. He may not have explicitly mentioned "unity" from 1:18-2:16 but that was always on Paul's mind.

Contextual Notes for 1 Corinthians 3:1-17

You/Your: Every "you" and "your" in this section is plural ("you all"). (See note on pronouns in Session 2.) Many try and interpret this section from an individual lens, but what changes when you see Paul talking to the community as a whole?

Spiritual people: We saw in chapter 2 that when Paul talks about "spiritual people" he does not mean the general "spiritual" that our society uses for any sort of personal pursuit of divinity and purpose, but the very specific reference to people filled and taught and led by God's Holy Spirit.

Of the "flesh": This word can simply mean our physical bodies, but Paul more often uses the word for "body" for that purpose. Paul often uses "flesh" to connote our susceptibility to sin and self-centeredness; that part of us that needs to be redeemed and given new life in Christ.

Verse 10: Where the ESV translates "skilled builder," the word Paul used was "wise," continuing his play on the theme of wisdom.

Verse 12, Building Materials: "Gold," "silver," and "precious stones" are often used to refer to the Old Testament Temple. Notice how Paul focuses the metaphor in verse 13—The question we should be asking is, *"What can survive the fire?"* not, *"What does it mean to build with 'gold' rather than 'silver' etc.?"*

History of Interpretation: This text comes with baggage. In different settings, people have read Paul's words here to refer to some sort of purifying purgatory, or at other times to say something about degrees of reward and hierarchy in heaven. But here and throughout Scripture, there is neither an emphasis on an ongoing, purifying judgement (purgatory), nor any talk of degrees of reward—what some would call a "works based righteousness." Here are a few things to consider as you enter this text:

- 1 Corinthians 4:1-5 offers a parallel account of what Paul is saying here.
- Matthew 25:14-30 offers another look at work and "reward" and might shed light here.
- "The Day" in verse 13 is the same day mentioned in 1:8 (see session 1 background).
- Paul talks about three main metaphors: 1) infants and food, 2) farmers and fields, and 3) builders building God's temple. Take them slowly and notice who is being referenced and how.

1 *CORINTHIANS 3:1-17*

[1]But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. [2]I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, [3]for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? [4]For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not being merely human? [5]What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. [6]I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. [7]So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. [8]He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. [9]For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building. [10]According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled

master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon
it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. [11]For no one can lay a
foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. [12]Now if
anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood,
hay, straw—[13]each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will
disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what
sort of work each one has done. [14]If the work that anyone has built on
the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. [15]If anyone's work is
burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only
as through fire. [16]Do you not know that you are God's temple and that
God's Spirit dwells in you? [17]If anyone destroys God's temple, God will
destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

INTERPRETATION (PAGES 19-21)

Some optional questions you might consider using:

- *In the background section for week one, we used the phrase "conversion of the imagination" to talk about the ways Paul was giving the Corinthians a whole new, "gospel-shaped" lens through which to see the world. How does this passage offer new ways of seeing their identity and purpose?*
- *In today's world, we use the phrase, "I'm only human" to talk about our shortcomings. What might Paul have to say in response?*
- *What do we learn about the roles of the leaders and of the rest of the Corinthians in the metaphors Paul uses?*
- *What is significant about we (plural) being called God's temple (singular)?*
- *What do you learn about God's character?*

Summary and Core Message:

APPLICATION (PAGES 22-24)

Feeling stuck?
You might consider the following application:

Paul's teaching gives us another opportunity to reflect on the interplay of unity, holiness, and mission that we discussed in Session 2. (page 48)

Verses 1-4 calls the whole community into unity; verses 16-17 gives us a new lens to see our identity. In the middle of it all (verses 5-15), Paul addresses the leaders and warns us to take seriously the call to build up the church of God with care.

This does not let anyone off the hook! In God's church, those called "leaders" are really servants graced by God to equip all the believers to exercise their gifts (Ephesians 4:11-12.)

Reflect on verses 1-4 & 16-18. Are there any tangible ways you can adopt the attitude and identity Paul gives us as Christ's "temple"? Are there ways to seek reconciliation with people whom you've experienced strife or jealousy? Pray about a concrete application for your own life.

Reflect on verses 5-15. What are the gifts, talents, and experiences God has given you that He wants to use to build up His Church? What is one concrete way you can step into service and leadership within this community?

Spiritual Practice

1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12 are two place where Paul talks about spiritual gifts. Meditate on those passages this week and ask God to give you clarity on the gifts He has given you for His body.

Prayer Requests

SESSION SIX

YOU'VE GOT MAIL

SESSION SIX

BABIES AND BUILDINGS

1 Corinthians 3:18-4:5

Getting Started

What is the most important message you've ever received or delivered?

OBSERVATION (PAGES 8-18)

Contextual Notes for 1 Corinthians 3:18-4:5

"All things are yours." Paul's statement would have raised eyebrows among those "wisdom seekers" in Corinth. We have quotes from famous Greek philosophers who said much the same thing. Cicero describes the wise as possessing all things, because they alone know how to use all things. Seneca, a contemporary of Paul, wrote, "all things belong to the wise man." These Greek philosophers believed "possessing all things" allowed one to be fully "self-sufficient." Not so with Paul, who grounds all this in their belonging to Christ. *Possessing all things meant more dependence on God, not less.*

The Jewish tradition also speaks of ownership of "all things." In Genesis 1, God creates man and woman in God's image and then says, *"Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every* living thing

living thing that moves on the earth." Psalm 8 picks up this same theme when it says, *"You have given [man or mankind] dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet."* (The words "man" and "son of man" throughout Psalm 8 can be translated as singular or collective; this would refer both to the way that God has given the task of ruling and ordering the world to all humankind, and more specifically to God's anointed king)

Servants and stewards: Paul's use of these terms describe something like a household manager, junior officer, or assistant; someone entrusted to perform the duties given to them by an owner or superior. One helpful image might be of **a letter courier**, tasked with delivering an important document to another; the courier has nothing to do with the creation of the document and is not responsible for how the information is received, *but must faithfully deliver the message.* (see also Ezekiel 33:7-9) In this context, "faithfulness" takes on a very specific connotation connected to Paul's stewardship metaphor.

Verse 19: Review Job 5:8-16 for context.

Verse 20: Review Psalm 94 for context.

1 *CORINTHIANS 3:18-4:5*

18 Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise
in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. 19 For the
wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written, "He catches the
wise in their craftiness," 20 and again, "The Lord knows the thoughts of
the wise, that they are futile." 21 So let no one boast in men. For all things
are yours, 22 whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or
death or the present or the future—all are yours, 23 and you are Christ's,
and Christ is God's. (4:1) This is how one should regard us, as servants of
Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. 2 Moreover, it is required of
stewards that they be found faithful. 3 But with me it is a very small thing
that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not
even judge myself. 4 For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I
am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. 5 Therefore do

not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God.

INTERPRETATION (PAGES 19-21)

Some optional questions you might consider using:

- *Paul reverses their claims from "I belong to Paul, I belong to Apollos, etc." (a more literal translation of 1:12) to "Paul (and everything else) belongs to you!" What is significant about this new lens and identity Paul is emphasizing?*
- *Why does Paul move from "all are yours" to "you are Christ's and Christ is God's"?*
- *What is significant about how Paul describes his own identity and leadership?*
- *Paul gives two correctives: "Don't deceive yourself" (3:18) and "don't judge." What sort of clarity do these give to the situation in Corinth?*
- *What are you learning about the identity we have in Christ?*

Summary and Core Message:

APPLICATION (PAGES 22-24)

Feeling stuck?
You might consider the following application:

> *It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.*
>
> *—C.S. Lewis*

In our text today, Paul seems to make an incredible leap in 3:22. Paul needs to address their divisions over human leaders, but then zooms all the way out: "Because you belong to Christ, the world, life and death, even time itself are all yours! Why are you stuck talking about which leader you belong to?"

C.S. Lewis describes a child upset over mud pies because he cannot understand the amazing things his parents are offering. We squabble and divide over things that, at the time, take all our attention and seem incredibly important, but might actually be distracting us from the bigger mission of God. Paul is writing to "convert the imagination" of the church to adopt a whole new lens through which to see the world, and their own calling in it.

This is about mission. It's not that we should never disagree or wrestle through decisions, actions, and theological issues—Paul will still have plenty to say in such matters. But keeping the bigger story and God's mission for us always in view is a great way to ensure we don't get overly consumed with things that are tiny in comparison. We are couriers of the mysteries of God! And Jesus is redeeming all of space, matter, time, life and death and has called us to partner with Him!

Will you deliver the message? Spend some time asking God to bring to mind specific people in your life who do not have a relationship with Jesus—family, neighbors, coworkers? Start praying for them and for opportunities and courage to share with them what you've been learning about Jesus. Maybe you could use this to start a conversation:

- Think through ahead of time how you would describe what you're learning about God through this study. The next time someone asks you, "how was your week?" instead of brushing it off say, "It's been great, I go to this weekly small group where we study the Bible and lately I've been learning_____?"

From there you might find ways to ask things like:

- Have you ever studied the Bible like that? What's your faith background?
- Where do you find the most meaning in life?
- What do you think about Jesus?

Before you ask any of these questions, make sure you genuinely want to learn about the person and their story! Look back to the application from week 4 to prepare to share your own story in ways that point to God's big story. Depending on how they respond, you might find different ways to invite them to take a step toward Jesus: invite them to coffee, bring them to small group, bring them to church. Another way would be to set up an "idea exchange" relationship: decide to read a book or listen to a podcast together and talk about it. Agree to switch off who chooses the content, one month read a book of your choosing, the next month read theirs.

Personal note (Tyler): It can be intimidating pursuing conversations like this because we are afraid of being asked questions we don't know how to answer. But I've come to love moments when I don't know the answer; I've found it's a perfect reason to set up a follow up discussion! I freely admit to the person, "I don't know that, but it's a great question!" then I tell them, "I will research and find an answer," and ask if they'd like to meet again next week! If that happens to you, any one of the MHBC pastors would be thrilled to hear your questions and help you form an answer to bring back to your friend.

Spiritual Practice

Meditate on Psalm 1 again this week. Are there any fresh ways God is speaking to you through this psalm? Pray about what is needed in your life to become like that tree planted by streams of water.

Prayer Requests

SESSION SEVEN

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THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE

SESSION SEVEN

THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE

1 Corinthians 4:6-21

Getting Started

What positive (or negative) things are on your horizon as we enter the Christmas season?

OBSERVATION (PAGES 8-18)

Background and Context

This is the final section in Paul's argument that began in 1:10. Keeping the whole in mind will help us understand what Paul is saying below. Look back over how Paul has used ideas like speech, wisdom, folly, power, weakness, strength. (For instance: 1 Corinthians 1:17-18, 22-23, 30-31; 2:1-5; 3:18-19)

Remember that this letter is Paul's response to the Corinthian church's letter to him as well as a response to what he has heard about them. Paul does not seem to have any problem with Apollos, only with how some of the Corinthians are acting. Notice how Paul contrasts himself and his fellow Apostles with the Corinthians; the "you have," "you are" statements could be Paul quoting back to the church what they've been saying about themselves.

Contextual Notes for 1 Corinthians 4:6-21

Verse 6 "What is written": Paul uses this term exclusively to refer to the Scriptures. One likely reference would be the Old Testament quotes he has used since chapter one, another would be to the entire Bible.

Parallelism: Verse 6 and 7 have two statements that can cause confusion—what does it mean to "go beyond what is written" and what does Paul mean by, "who sees anything different in you?" Bible writers often use a parallel structure in their sentences. One way forward is to look at what immediately follows each phrase to determine what they might mean in context.

Verse 13 and 16: The word "entreat" and the word "urge" are actually the same word in the original language. It's also the same word that Paul used in 1:10.

Verse 21: A "rod" is a symbol of discipline. See for instance Proverbs 10:13.

1 *CORINTHIANS 4:6-21*

6 I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit,
brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written,
that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another. 7 For
who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did
not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not
receive it? 8 Already you have all you want! Already you have become
rich! Without us you have become kings! And would that you did reign,
so that we might share the rule with you! 9 For I think that God has
exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because
we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men. 10 We
are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak,
but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. 11 To the
present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted

and homeless, [12]and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; [13]when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things. [14]I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. [15]For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. [16]I urge you, then, be imitators of me. [17]That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church. [18]Some are arrogant, as though I were not coming to you. [19]But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power. [20]For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power. [21]What do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?

INTERPRETATION (PAGES 19-21)

Some optional questions you might consider using:

- *Imagine you are one of the members of a house church in Corinth. How does Paul's use of irony in verses 6-13 confront your community's self-perception? How does this speak to today's society?*
- *Why does Paul urge them to "imitate me"? What clues in the text help to clarify the sort of actions Paul might be urging them to imitate?*
- *What might Paul mean when he says he wants to find out, "not the talk of these arrogant people but their power"?*
- *What is revealed about the identity and directives we have as the people of God?*

Summary and Core Message:

APPLICATION (PAGES 22-24)

Feeling stuck?
You might consider the following application:

"I urge you then, be imitators of me."

This sentence might cause us to cringe today. Is Paul really putting himself forward as a model? Doesn't that contradict everything he's said about boasting only in God?

Paul is modeling the same sort of humble confidence he has been expounding throughout this letter. He truly believes what he has been telling the Corinthians: that everything he has was received as a gift (3:10; 4:7), that through his foolishness God's wisdom is displayed (1:17; 2:4), and that his own weakness and dishonor reveal God's power (4:8-13).

For Paul, right-thinking leads to right-living. We have to maintain a proper order: we start with the gospel—Jesus died for our sins and rose from the dead—and as we receive God's grace in our lives, God continues to transform us into people who live rightly. That's the only reason Paul can say, "imitate me."

Two questions for us might be: **Who imitates you? Who are you imitating?**

1. *Who imitates you?* It's not enough to "say the right things." If our actions do not display the cross-centered, upside down wisdom of God then our witness will be ruined. Of course, part of God's upside down wisdom is that He continues to work through broken, messy, forgiven people. Therefore, Paul is not saying only people who have "arrived" and are "perfect" can lead (that's

what the Corinthians thought!), but as we continue to confess sins, receive God's grace, and grow in the cross-centered wisdom of God we should see visible fruit in our lives that others can emulate.

Evaluate your own life this week: is there any area where you would not want other followers of Christ to "imitate"? Is there any unconfessed sin keeping you from living out the gospel? What is a concrete step you will take this week?

2. *Who are you imitating?* The Christian walk was never meant to be a solo venture. Maybe you're a young parent and really admire how an older couple has raised their kids to have strong faith—ask them for some tips! Maybe someone in your small group has displayed a thirst and love for Scripture that you want yourself—ask them how they grew to love the Bible. Find other specific ways people around you are living out their faith and invite them to give you direction and guidance

Spiritual Practice

In the next study, we will be continuing our walk through this letter. **Take some time over the next few weeks and read through the entire letter of 1 Corinthians again**. Invite the Holy Spirit into your time and seek to gain more insight into the flow and feel of the letter and any major themes or key verses that stick out to you. What is God inviting you to take to heart as you prepare to dive into more of this letter? How can this shape your prayer life in the weeks to come?

Prayer Requests

APPENDIX

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FOR FURTHER STUDY

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