

WHY READ AND STUDY PAUL'S LETTERS?

If you want to find out more about Jesus, you can learn life-transforming things about him from the letters a man named Paul wrote in the first century. These letters are now part of the Bible. Paul is credited with explaining the teachings of Jesus to the Greco-Roman world and launching Christianity as a world religion. So his letters are one of the most widely-quoted parts of the Bible.

There's a bit of a problem, though. Many of Paul's sayings are inspiring and uplifting: "If God is for us, who can be against us?" "If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" But he makes some other statements that are highly controversial and difficult to understand. "Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission." "Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you." Because of statements like these, many people find Paul so confusing and upsetting that they refuse to read his writings.

But there's no reason to avoid Paul. The problem isn't with him. It's with the way he's usually approached. His thoughts and ideas are mostly known through individual statements that are quoted out of their original contexts. Sure, he was a master of the sound bite, a guy who could really turn a phrase. But he's got to have the chance to explain himself.

Even the most intelligent people in the world haven't been able to understand Paul piece by piece. The great philosopher John Locke was having difficulty understanding his writings. He finally recognized it was because he was approaching them "chopped and minced" into a collection of one-liners. The real way to understand them, Locke realized, was to "read a whole letter through, from one end to the other, all at once, to see what was the main

subject,” and only then try to understand its individual parts. When Paul is allowed to have his say this way, his writings take on a depth and complexity that discredit the stereotypes and simplifications that often make up his popular image.

This study guide will give you the chance to read Paul’s writings as the letters they truly are—personal exchanges rooted in real-life situations—and understand their overall meanings. You’ll look at his first six letters, the ones he wrote while on his journeys through the Roman Empire to tell people about Jesus. You’ll go through these letters faster, reading much more of them at a time. This might not be the way you’re used to approaching Paul. It might require a bit of an adjustment. But you’ll probably understand him in a way you never have before.

When it comes to a guy like Paul, you’ve got to “read big.” This is your chance.

UNDERSTANDING THE
BOOKS OF THE BIBLE

PAUL’S JOURNEY LETTERS

UNDERSTANDING THE BOOKS OF THE BIBLE

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PAUL'S JOURNEY LETTERS

1 and 2 THESSALONIANS
1 and 2 CORINTHIANS
GALATIANS
ROMANS

Christopher R. Smith



Transforming lives through God's Word



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HOW THESE STUDY GUIDES ARE DIFFERENT

Did you know you could read and study the Bible without using any chapters or verses? The books of the Bible are real “books.” They’re meant to be experienced the same way other books are: as exciting, interesting works that keep you turning pages right to the end and then make you want to go back and savor each part. The UNDERSTANDING THE BOOKS OF THE BIBLE series of study guides will help you do that with the Bible.

While you can use these guides with any version or translation, they’re especially designed to be used with *The Books of The Bible*, an edition of the Scriptures from Biblica that takes out the chapter and verse numbers and presents the biblical books in their natural form. Here’s what people are saying about reading the Bible this way:

I love it. I find myself understanding Scripture in a new way, with a fresh lens, and I feel spiritually refreshed as a result. I learn much more through stories being told, and with this new format, I feel the truth of the story come alive for me.

Reading Scripture this way flows beautifully. I don’t miss the chapter and verse numbers. I like them gone. They got in the way.

I've been a reader of the Bible all of my life. But after reading just a few pages without chapters and verses, I was amazed at what I'd been missing all these years.

For more information about *The Books of The Bible* or to obtain a low-cost copy, visit <http://www.thebooksofthebible.info>. Premium editions of this Bible are scheduled for future release from Zondervan at your favorite Christian retailer.

For people who are used to chapters and verses, reading and studying the Bible without them may take a little getting used to. It's like when you get a new cell phone or upgrade the operating system on your computer. You have to unlearn some old ways of doing things and learn some new ways. But it's not too long before you catch on to how the new system works and find you can do a lot of things you couldn't before.

Here are some of the ways you and your group will have a better experience of the Scriptures by using these study guides.

YOU'LL FOLLOW THE NATURAL FLOW OF BIBLICAL BOOKS

This guide will take you through Paul's first six letters, the ones he wrote while on his journeys, following their natural flow. (The way four of these letters unfold is illustrated in the outlines on pages 26, 62, 82, and 104.) You won't go chapter-by-chapter through these books, because chapter divisions in the Bible often come at the wrong places and break up the flow. Did you know that the chapter divisions used in most modern Bibles were added more than a thousand years after the biblical books were written? And that the verse numbers were added more than three centuries after that? If you grew up with the chapter-and-verse system, it may feel like part of the inspired Word of God. But it's not. Those little numbers aren't holy, and when you read and study Paul's letters without them, you'll hear their message more clearly than ever before.

To help you get a feel for where you are in each book's natural flow, in the longer letters the sessions will be headed by a visual cue, like this:

Romans > Main Argument > First Phase, continued

YOU'LL UNDERSTAND WHOLE BOOKS

Imagine going to a friend's house to watch a movie you've never seen before. After only a couple of scenes, your friend stops the film and says, "So, tell me what you think of it so far." When you give your best shot at a reply, based on the little you've seen, your friend says, "You know, there's a scene in another movie that always makes me think of this one." He switches to a different movie and before you know it, you're watching a scene from the middle of another film.

Who would ever try to watch a movie this way? Yet many study guides take this approach to the Bible. They have you read a few paragraphs from one book, then jump to a passage in another book. The UNDERSTANDING THE BOOKS OF THE BIBLE series doesn't do that. Instead, these study guides focus on understanding the message and meaning of one book at a time. Your group will read through these six letters in their entirety, not just selected chapters or verses.

Sessions 1, 3, 4, 12, 17, and 22 are overviews that will let you experience each of the letters as a whole, to prepare you for considering their individual sections. Reading through an entire book at once will be like viewing a whole movie before zooming in on one scene. Groups that read books of the Bible aloud together have a great experience doing this. (If you've never done it before, give it a try—you'll be surprised at how well it flows and how fast the time passes.)

For these overview sessions, the discussion will be briefer and designed to allow people to share their overall impressions. If you're using *The Books of The Bible*, you may find it helpful to read the book introductions in that edition together before reading each book itself.

As a group leader, you should take a moment after each of these readings to allow people to ask about any words or phrases they didn't understand and help the group understand them better.

YOU'LL DECIDE FOR YOURSELVES WHAT TO DISCUSS

In each session of this study guide there are many options for discussion. While each session could be completed by a group in about an hour and a half, any one of the questions could lead to an involved conversation. There's no need to cut the conversation short to try to "get through it all." As a group leader, you can read through all the questions ahead of time and decide which one(s) to begin with, and what order to take them up in. If you do get into an involved discussion of one question, you can leave out some of the others. Or you can extend the study over more than one meeting if you do want to cover them all. (You may want to do this when discussing Paul's longer and more complex letters, such as 2 Corinthians and Romans.) You can use this whole guide to do a study of Paul's first six letters, or you can use part of it to do a shorter study of one or two letters, for example, spending eight weeks or so on 1 Corinthians.

TOGETHER, YOU'LL TELL THE STORY

Each session gives creative suggestions for reading the passage you'll be discussing. If you're using *The Books of The Bible*, you'll find that the natural sections it marks off by white space match up with the sections of the reading. If you're using another edition of the Bible, you'll be able to identify these sections easily because they'll be indicated in this guide by their opening lines, or by some other means that makes them obvious.

EVERYBODY WILL PARTICIPATE

There's plenty of opportunity for everyone in the group to participate. Everyone can take turns reading from the letters that you'll be considering. Group members can also read the session introduction or the discussion questions aloud. As a leader, you can easily involve quiet people by giving them these opportunities. And everyone will feel that they can speak up and answer the questions, because they're not looking for "right answers." Instead, they invite the group to work together to understand the Bible.

YOU'LL ALL SHARE DEEPLY

The discussion questions will invite you to share deeply about your ideas and experiences. The answers to these questions can't be found by just "looking them up." They require reflection on the meaning of each passage, in the wider context of the book it belongs to, in light of your personal experience. These aren't the kinds of abstract, academic questions that make the discussion feel like a test. Instead, they'll connect the Bible passage to your life in practical, personal, relational ways.

To create a climate of trust where this kind of deep sharing is encouraged, here are a couple of ground rules that your group should agree to at its first meeting:

Confidentiality. Group members agree to keep what is shared in the group strictly confidential. "What's said in the group stays in the group."

Respect. Group members will treat other members with respect at all times, even when disagreeing over ideas.

HOW TO LEAD GROUP STUDIES USING THIS GUIDE

Each session has three basic parts:

Introduction to the Study

Have a member of your group read the introduction to the session out loud to everyone. Then give group members the chance to ask questions about the introduction and offer their own thoughts and examples.

Reading from Paul's Letters

Read the selection out loud together. (The study guide will offer suggestions for various ways you can do this for each session. In some cases, reading and discussion will be combined.)

Paul's letters often include detailed theological reflections that need to be followed carefully. Group members should always be given the opportunity

after the reading to ask about words or concepts that aren't clear to them. If the reading for a session is long and the guide suggests dividing it among a number of readers, it's a good idea to pause after each reader finishes to let group members ask about words and concepts then and to make sure everybody is following what Paul is saying.

Discussion Questions

Most questions are introduced with some observations. These may give some background to the history and culture of the ancient world or explain where you are in the flow of the book. After these observations there are suggested discussion questions. Many of them have multiple parts that are really just different ways of getting at an issue. The questions tend to be open-ended, to encourage discussion and the sharing of perspectives and experiences. Don't see it as a problem if they don't get resolved completely.

You don't have to discuss the questions in the order they appear in the study guide. You can choose to spend your time exploring just one or two questions and not do the others. Or you can have shorter discussions of each question so that you do cover them all. As the group leader, before the meeting you should read the questions and the observations that introduce them and decide which ones you want to emphasize.

When you get to a given question, have someone read aloud the observations and the question. As you answer the question, interact with the observations (you can agree or disagree with them) in light of your reading from the Bible. Use only part of the question to get at the issue from one angle, or use all of the parts, as you choose.

TIPS FOR HOME GROUPS, SUNDAY SCHOOL CLASSES, COMMUNITY BIBLE EXPERIENCES, AND INDIVIDUAL USE

If you're using this guide in a *home group*, you may want to begin each meeting (or at least some meetings) by having dinner together. You may also want to have a time of singing and prayer before or after the study.

If you're using this guide in a *Sunday school class*, you may want to have a time of singing and prayer before or after the study.

This study guide can also be used in connection with a *community Bible experience* of the letters Paul wrote on his journeys. If you're using it in this way:

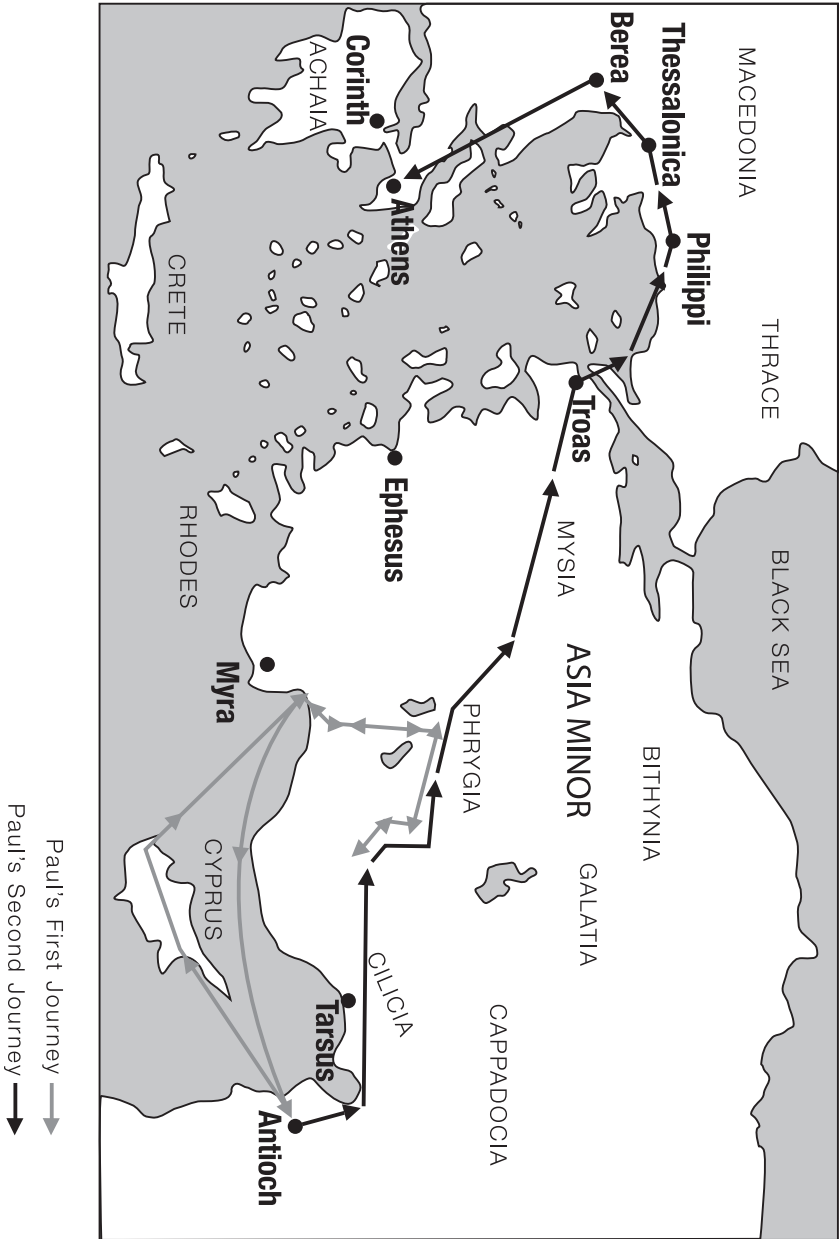
- Encourage people to read each session's Scripture passage by themselves early in the week (except for Sessions 1, 3, 4, 12, 17, and 22, when the whole church will gather to hear entire letters read out loud and to answer the discussion questions about them together).
- Do each session in midweek small groups.
- Invite people to write/create some response to each small-group session that could be shared in worship that weekend. These might involve poetry, journal or blog entries, artwork, dramas, videos, and so on.
- During the weekend worship services, let people share these responses, and have preaching on the topic of the session that was studied that week. Speakers can gather up comments they've heard from people and draw on their own reflections to sum up the church's experience of that session.

This guide can also be used for *individual study*. You can write out your responses to the questions in a notebook or journal. (However, we really encourage reading and studying the Bible in community!)

Note: Anytime you see *italicized* words in Scripture quotations in this book, the italics have been added for emphasis.

BEGINNING OF PAUL'S SECOND JOURNEY

1 THESSALONIANS



SESSION 1

EXPERIENCING 1 THESSALONIANS
AS A WHOLE

INTRODUCTION

Have someone read this introduction aloud for your group. As you listen to it, you can find the locations it mentions on the map on page 8.

In the middle of the first century, a man named Paul spread the good news about Jesus throughout much of the Roman Empire. He was known as Paul in Greek, but his original name was Saul. He was a Jew from the city of Tarsus in Asia Minor (present-day Turkey), a rabbi expertly trained in the Hebrew Scriptures. He'd also studied Greek literature and philosophy. This background and education made him ideally equipped to explain to other nations how Jesus, the Messiah (promised deliverer) of the Jewish people, could also be the Savior of the whole world. We'll learn what Paul taught about Jesus as we read and discuss his letters in the sessions ahead.

When a large and vibrant community of Jesus' followers formed in the city of Antioch, Paul was asked to come and be one of their teachers. This community eventually sent him on a series of journeys out into the rest of the empire to tell people about Jesus. He first went to the island of Cyprus and several cities in Asia Minor. On his next journey, around AD 51, he traveled across Asia Minor to northern Greece (known then as Macedonia). In the

cities of Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea, many people responded positively and "turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God." But Paul's message proved so controversial that others became violently opposed and he was chased out of each city by a riot. Paul had to go to Athens in southern Greece (Achaia) for his own safety.

He was naturally concerned for the followers of Jesus he'd left behind. Would they abandon their faith under the pressure of persecution? It wasn't safe for Paul to return to challenge and encourage them. He was seen as a notorious and provocative Jewish teacher in these cities, where Jews were treated with hostility and suspicion even at the best of times. But one of his traveling companions, Timothy, was Greek, and he could return safely to see how the new followers were doing.

Timothy traveled back to Thessalonica and discovered they'd stayed faithful. He returned to Athens and reported this to Paul. Paul then wrote them a letter to say how glad he was, and how much they meant to him. He also sent advice and instruction to guide them as they continued to follow Jesus. This letter has become part of the Bible. It's known as "1 Thessalonians" or "First Thessalonians" because it's the first one Paul wrote to the followers of Jesus in Thessalonica. Timothy carried this letter to them on a second trip back to their city. In keeping with the practice of the time, he would have read it aloud to a gathering of the whole community of believers.

(It's likely that Timothy also visited and encouraged the believers in Philippi and Berea, but if Paul wrote them letters at this time, they've been lost. However, the Bible does contain a letter Paul sent to the Philippians some years later. It suggests that the Philippians, too, remained faithful to Jesus despite the opposition they faced when they first came to believe.)

READING

As a group, read through 1 Thessalonians together. (This should take less than ten minutes.) It's on pages 1507–10 in *The Books of The Bible*. If you're using another edition, you can find it in its Table of Contents.

Take turns reading one paragraph each. As you listen to Paul's words, you can find the places he mentions on the map on page 8.

Notice how this book of the Bible is an actual letter. It has brief opening and closing sections that follow the standard conventions for letters of the time. In the main body, as was also customary, Paul begins by describing some good things about the Thessalonians he thanks God for. He talks at length about his relationship with them and wishes them a blessing. He then makes a transition and provides briefer teaching and instruction on several practical matters.

As you're listening, if you don't understand the meaning of particular words or phrases, make a note of them. After the reading, your group can work together to understand these better.

DISCUSSION

- ➡ Was this the first time you'd read a whole book of the Bible out loud in a group? If so, what was the experience like compared to other ways you've read the Bible, by yourself or with others?
- ➡ If you've read or studied the Bible before, or attended church, you may have heard some individual statements quoted from 1 Thessalonians as practical moral and spiritual advice, such as, "Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." But what would you now say is the letter's overall message?
- ➡ Find the places early in this letter where Paul says he was like a spiritual "mother" and "father" to the Thessalonians, and where he describes his absence from them as being "orphaned" or separated from his family. Are there people in your life who are like spiritual family members to you? Who are they? How did you get to know them? How would you describe their relationship to you: Are they spiritual mothers? Fathers? Children?
- ➡ To enter more deeply into what Paul is feeling here, think of a situation where you might be separated from these "family

members" and out of contact with them. You're uncertain about how well they're holding up in a threatening situation, and you're wondering what false things people might be telling them about you. If you're comfortable doing so, share this scenario (or perhaps an actual situation like this) with the group.

- ➡ Paul reminds the Thessalonians, "When we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know." Do you know people today who are being persecuted as followers of Jesus? (Are you experiencing persecution yourself?) Why does this happen? Do you think persecution is something every Christian should expect to experience? Why do you think the Thessalonians remained faithful to Jesus instead of giving up their faith?

PAUL'S PRACTICAL INSTRUCTIONS TO THE THESSALONIANS

INTRODUCTION

In the previous session we looked at 1 Thessalonians as a whole and discussed Paul's relationship with the believers he was writing to. In this session we'll consider the practical instructions he gave them on a variety of matters in the second half of his letter. These are probably things that Timothy told Paul needed addressing, based on what he'd seen and heard in Thessalonica.

READING AND DISCUSSION

1 Have someone read the introduction to the practical instructions in this letter, which begins, "As for other matters, brothers and sisters . . ." (If you're using a different Bible version, look for the beginning of a chapter that says something like, "Finally, brothers . . .") Continue the reading through Paul's teaching about sexual purity ("It is God's will that you should be sanctified . . ."), and end with "the very God who gives you his Holy Spirit."

As Paul teaches the Thessalonians how to follow Jesus more closely, he insists that they should "avoid sexual immorality." That is, they should have

sexual relations only within marriage, even though in their culture sexual relations outside marriage were tolerated and even approved. Paul says that this isn't his own personal teaching, but a direct instruction from God. (We'll learn more of the reasons for this teaching in session 6.)

➔ Your daughter is in junior high and shows you her health class curriculum, which says that sex is a way for two people to show they want to be in a committed relationship or for them to say that they like each other or for them to have fun together. She asks you if this is right. What do you say in response?

2 Have another person read the brief section about responsible living that begins, "Now about your love for one another" and ends, "so that you will not be dependent on anybody."

The "love for one another" that Paul describes here includes offering practical assistance to those in need. So they can offer this assistance, the Thessalonians have to "work with [their own] hands." Paul says that by working hard and being generous, they'll "win the respect of outsiders."

➔ Can you think of a time when followers of Jesus have won the respect of your community or nation through their hard work and generosity? If so, share the story with the group.

3 Have someone read Paul's teaching about Jesus' return that begins, "Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed" and ends, "Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing."

We can tell from this letter that Paul taught the Thessalonians Jesus would someday come back to earth from heaven and bring about the "day of the Lord." This was the time foreseen by the Hebrew prophets when God would definitively establish worldwide justice. The Thessalonians were concerned that believers who died ("fell asleep") before Jesus returned wouldn't "be with the Lord forever." Paul corrects this misunderstanding by explaining that God

will raise these believers from the dead, so that the Thessalonians will be joyfully reunited with them in God's presence.

They were also concerned about when, exactly, Jesus would come back. They seem to have speculated about "times and dates." But, Paul explains, Jesus' return will be sudden and unexpected, "like a thief in the night." Rather than trying to figure out exactly when this will happen, the Thessalonians should live in such a way that whenever he comes back, Jesus will be pleased and honored by their lives.

➡ Paul's essential concern here is to reassure the Thessalonians that their departed loved ones will rise from the dead and be with Jesus. Ironically, many people look to these comments instead for information about "times and dates," which Paul says we really can't know. Why do you think people do this?

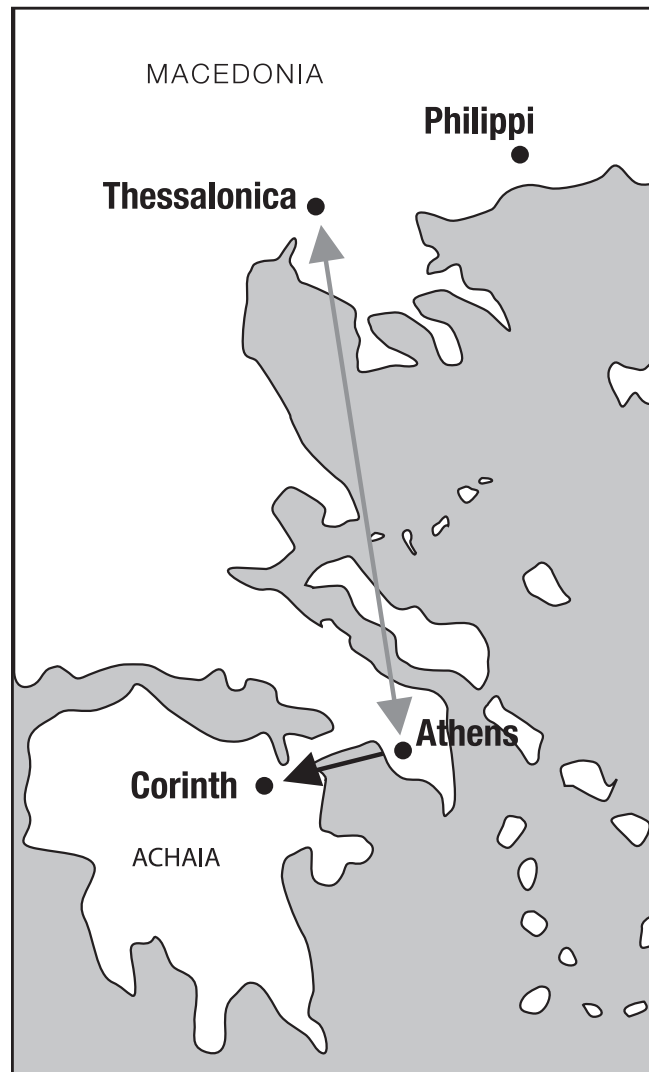
➡ When we lose someone we love, that loss can be painful, even if we expect to see them again when Jesus returns. If you've lost someone you love, how do Paul's words here affect you?

➡ What would you like Jesus to find you doing when he returns?

4 Have someone read Paul's instructions about life within the community of Jesus' followers, beginning with, "Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to acknowledge those who work hard" and ending with, "hold on to what is good, reject every kind of evil."

➡ If you're part of a community of Jesus' followers, which of these instructions would you most like to see put into practice better in your community? Which ones would you most like to follow more consistently yourself as you relate to God and other people?

PAUL'S SECOND JOURNEY CONTINUED



2 THESSALONIANS

Timothy travels back and forth →
from Athens to Thessalonica

Paul continues on to Corinth →

EXPERIENCING 2 THESSALONIANS AS A WHOLE

INTRODUCTION

As we've seen, Paul's coworker Timothy carried 1 Thessalonians from Athens to the believers in Thessalonica. It seems that when he returned, he encouraged Paul to follow up on a couple of things with them:

- Some in Thessalonica were saying Paul taught that the “day of the Lord” had “already come.” But according to the biblical prophets, the “day of the Lord” would be the time when God would punish his enemies and reward his faithful followers. The Thessalonians were still enduring “persecutions and trials.” So if this “day” had already come (secretly and spiritually in some sense), and no further deliverance was to be expected, this was a real disappointment.
- Despite Paul's admonition in his first letter to “mind your own business and work with your hands,” many of the Thessalonians were still “idle and disruptive” and “busybodies.”

These two concerns may actually have been connected: People may have felt that because the “day of the Lord” had arrived spiritually, there was no longer any need for them to participate in mundane activities like working for a living.

Paul wrote a second letter to the Thessalonians to address these concerns. Timothy likely returned once more to Thessalonica with this letter. Meanwhile Paul pressed on with his second journey, traveling west across Achaia to the city of Corinth (see map on page 18), where many people became followers of Jesus after hearing Paul's message. This gives us an early glimpse into the pattern Paul developed to multiply his own efforts: Even as he was working in one place, through letters and messengers he continued to guide and direct the communities he'd started in other places.

READING

Read through 2 Thessalonians together, taking turns reading one paragraph each. (This should take a little over five minutes.) This letter is right after 1 Thessalonians, on pages 1513–15, in *The Books of The Bible*. If you're using another edition of the Scriptures, you'll also find this letter right after 1 Thessalonians.

Notice how this book of the Bible, too, is an actual letter, with conventional opening and closing sections. And notice that Paul once again describes some good things he's grateful for about the Thessalonians before addressing an important concern at some length. He then wishes a blessing on the Thessalonians and transitions to discuss “other matters” more briefly.

As you listen, once again note particular words or phrases whose meaning you don't understand, and discuss them afterwards.

DISCUSSION

1 Begin your group discussion by thinking about 2 Thessalonians as a whole.

- ➡ Now that you've read a couple of the kind of letters that were written in the Roman world, how is their form similar to, and different from, the kind of letters and e-mails that people send today?

➔ Suppose that you're one of Jesus' followers in Thessalonica and you hear Timothy read this second letter in one of your worship gatherings. A friend of yours misses this gathering and asks you what was in the letter. What would you tell them? Have each person in your group decide individually, and then share your answers.

2 In response to the false reports that he taught the “day of the Lord” had already come, Paul told the Thessalonians not to be “unsettled or alarmed by the teaching allegedly from us.” Paul explained that the “day of the Lord” would be a visible event, not a secret, spiritual one: The Lord Jesus will be “revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels,” and God will “pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled.” So the Thessalonians shouldn't be discouraged, thinking that God would never rescue Jesus' followers or hold their persecutors accountable.

Much of what Paul explains here about why Jesus hasn't returned yet is not clear from our vantage point. His references to “the rebellion,” the “man of lawlessness,” the “secret power of lawlessness,” and “the one who now holds it back” have been the subject of much speculation, but there's no broad consensus among interpreters as to their meaning. Instead of trying to match these things up with developments in current events, it seems best to accept that in the Bible, God hasn't given us specific details like names, dates, and places connected with Christ's return. Rather, as Paul told the Thessalonians, we should “stand firm and hold fast” and “never tire of doing what is good” as we faithfully await the time when Jesus will destroy all opposition to God's purposes for the world “by the splendor of his coming.”

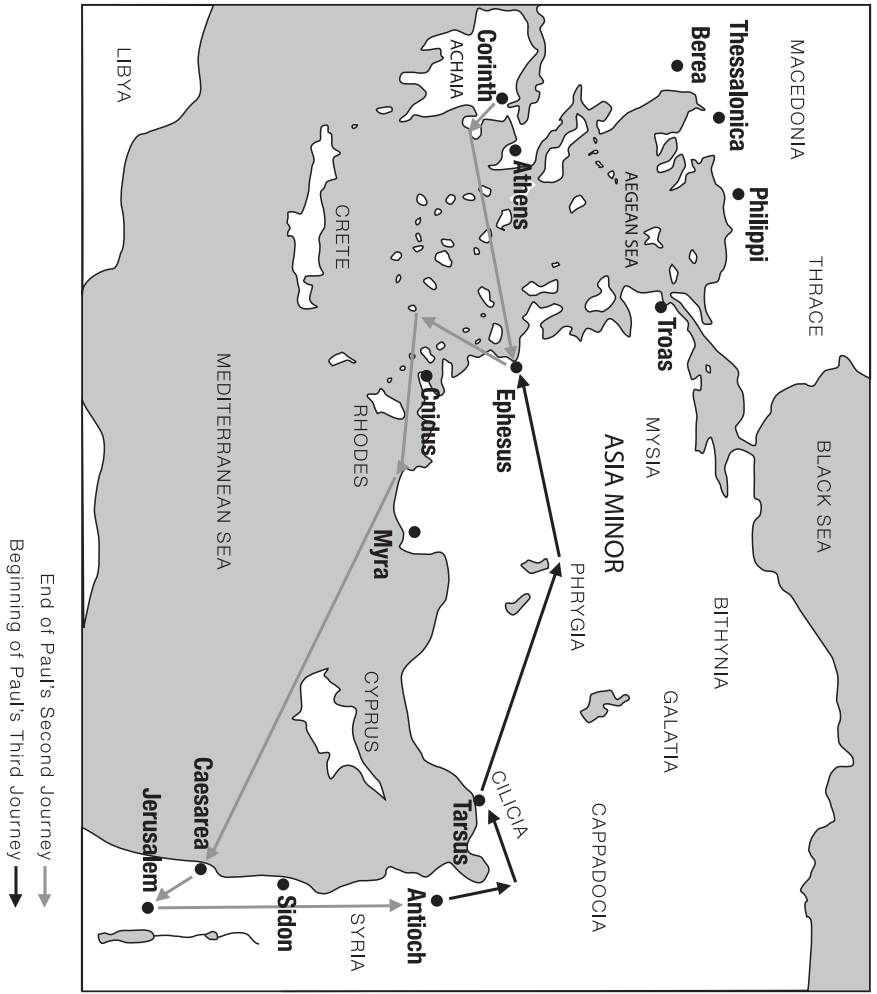
➔ Put yourself in the place of one of the people who was identified when you were asked in session 1 about believers being persecuted. What difference would it make to this person to know that Jesus will one day set foot on this earth again and deal personally with those who are persecuting his followers, rather than “return” in some secret, spiritual way? (You can answer on your own behalf if you're experiencing persecution yourself.)

3 In 2 Thessalonians Paul repeats and expands the instructions he gave in his first letter about working hard and minding one's own business. He even tells the Thessalonians, as a community, to discipline anyone who disregards these instructions: “Do not associate with them, in order that they may feel ashamed.”

➔ If you're part of a church, does it provide financial assistance to individuals in need? How does it determine that a person is genuinely in need, and how does it help people get back into a position to provide for themselves again?

➔ Have you ever been part of a group that tried to encourage people to live more godly lives by “shunning” them (having nothing to do with them) if they acted in unacceptable ways? Did it work? Paul tells the Thessalonians to maintain a consistently loving attitude towards the shunned person: “Do not regard them as an enemy, but warn them as you would a fellow believer” (literally “as a brother or sister”). Was the group you were involved with able to maintain this attitude?

PAUL'S THIRD JOURNEY



OUTLINE OF 1 CORINTHIANS

*Paul addresses twelve topics,
six that he's heard about from people who've visited Corinth
and six that the Corinthians have asked him about in a letter.*

Things Paul Heard About	Session #	Things the Corinthians Wrote About
Divisions in the Community	5	
Toleration of Immorality	6	
Lawsuits between Believers	6	
Believers Going to Prostitutes	6	
	7	Abstinence within Marriage
	7	Whether to Get Married
	8	Food Offered to Idols
Head Coverings	9	
The Lord's Supper	9	
	10	Spiritual Gifts
	11	The Resurrection
	11	The Collection for the Poor

1 CORINTHIANS

EXPERIENCING 1 CORINTHIANS AS A WHOLE

INTRODUCTION

The city of Corinth, where Paul went even while corresponding with the Thessalonians, was a strategic place for spreading the message about Jesus. It was an influential and cosmopolitan city that controlled a key trade route across the Mediterranean. So Paul stayed there for a year and a half, helping the believers form a strong and growing community. Then he concluded his second journey by going to Jerusalem and Antioch to report on his work.

The next year, around AD 53, Paul set out on a third journey and went to Ephesus. (See the map on page 25.) This was another ideal base for spreading the message about Jesus throughout the populous Roman province of Asia (present-day Turkey). Paul lived and worked in Ephesus for two years. And because the city was just across the Aegean Sea from Corinth, he could continue to guide and advise the Corinthian believers through letters and messengers.

Two of the letters he wrote to them during this time have become part of the Bible. These letters are clearly part of an ongoing correspondence. In them, Paul refers to other letters he and these believers have exchanged. But only these two letters have survived.

In the one he wrote first, which we know as 1 Corinthians, Paul answers some questions that the believers have written to him about, and he also

addresses some situations in their community that he's heard about from people who've visited them. He would eventually send his coworker Timothy to Corinth to help explain what he'd written. But Paul sent the letter itself ahead of Timothy, with some unnamed "brothers," probably feeling that its timely teaching and correction couldn't wait until Timothy was able to arrange to travel personally across the Aegean Sea.

READING

Read together through 1 Corinthians. This should take a little less than an hour. It's on pages 1519–34 in *The Books of The Bible*. If you're using another edition, you can find it in its Table of Contents. (Note: In traditional Bibles, Paul's letters are presented in order of length, from longest to shortest, not in the order he wrote them. So in those Bibles 1 Corinthians will come several books before 1 and 2 Thessalonians.)

Take turns reading out loud. Change readers whenever you come to what feels like a natural break. Note any words or phrases you don't understand and discuss them afterwards. (There's a note about the word "circumcision" at the end of this session.)

As you read, you can follow the outline of 1 Corinthians on page 26 to see how Paul is addressing different topics in the course of this letter. Note that Paul first addresses the things he's heard about, and then, about halfway through, he makes a transition to answer the Corinthians' questions.

Notice how this letter has the same overall shape as the others you've read, even though its main body is much longer:

- Conventional opening (sender's name, recipients' name, good wish)
- Something Paul is thankful to God for about the recipients
- Main body (in this case, a number of different discussions, some of them extended)
- Conventional closing (travel plans of Paul and his co-workers, greetings, signature, good wishes)

DISCUSSION

- ➔ What was it like for your group to spend nearly an hour, rather than just five or ten minutes, reading through an entire book of the Bible?
- ➔ What were some of the things in this letter that you found most encouraging and inspiring? What were some of the things that bothered or disturbed you?
- ➔ Which of the topics that Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians are you most looking forward to discussing in the sessions ahead? Why?

NOTE

In 1 Corinthians Paul mentions “circumcision” for the first time. This will become an important concern in his later letters. In the Bible, “circumcision” refers to male circumcision, the removal of a flap of skin from the penis. This has been practiced in a variety of cultures for different ceremonial and medical reasons. Jews circumcised boys when they were eight days old as a sign of belonging to a covenant with God. (The Hebrew idiom speaks of “cutting” a covenant.) So-called female circumcision or genital mutilation was not practiced in biblical cultures and nothing in the Bible supports or condones it.

SESSION 5

DIVISIONS IN THE COMMUNITY OF BELIEVERS

1 Corinthians > Things Paul Heard About > Divisions in the Community

INTRODUCTION

The first problem Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians is one he’s heard about from the servants of an Ephesian woman named Chloe. They’ve been to Corinth and are reporting that Jesus’ followers there have divided into factions. Various leaders have come and taught them at different times, including Paul, Cephas (Peter), and Apollos. The Corinthians are treating these leaders like the Greek philosophers of their day, giving them exclusive allegiance. Many Corinthians are calling themselves followers of one teacher or another. Others are saying simply, “I follow Christ” (implying, “and you don’t”).

In this first major section of his letter, Paul makes an impassioned appeal for *unity* among the Corinthian believers. “I appeal to you,” he writes, “that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united.” But to achieve this unity, he has to correct their false impression that he and other leaders are *rival* philosophers who are each trying to win a following. And in order to do that, he needs to challenge the Corinthians’ understanding of what *wisdom* itself is. (The word *philosophy* means “love of wisdom.”)

The prevailing notion, influenced by Greek philosophy, was that *wisdom* was the ability to engage in speculative reasoning and speak in polished

rhetoric. The Corinthians were evaluating their Christian teachers by these standards and gathering around the ones they judged to be the best. Paul explains that God’s wisdom is very different from human wisdom. God’s *wisdom* involves deep, paradoxical, counter-intuitive truths that are “discerned only through the Spirit.”

When the Corinthians understand that their various teachers are expressing these deep truths in ways that differ only on the surface, they’ll recognize that these teachers aren’t *rivals*; they’re working together. They’ll also appreciate their community’s organic *unity* in Christ.

READING

Since this is a long section of the letter, your group may wish to pause after each part of the reading to give members the chance to ask about words or concepts that aren’t clear. You can do this in any session where there’s a long reading that’s divided up into parts.

Have someone read Paul’s correction of the Corinthians’ idea of *wisdom*, beginning with, “I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (This is a long selection, so give it to someone who’s comfortable reading.)

Have another person read Paul’s explanation that he and the other teachers are not *rivals*, beginning, “Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit . . .”

Then have someone read Paul’s closing personal appeal to the Corinthians to be restored to *unity*. It begins, “This, then, is how you ought to regard us: as servants of Christ.” It ends, “Shall I come to you with a rod of discipline, or shall I come in love and with a gentle spirit?”

DISCUSSION

1 Paul says he came to Corinth not “with eloquence or human wisdom,” but only proclaiming “Jesus Christ, and him crucified,” and that God

confirmed his message with “a demonstration of the Spirit’s power.” The Corinthian believers themselves illustrate how God’s power is shown through things that seem “weak” or “foolish” to human wisdom: While many of them are in humble situations, they’re the people God has chosen in their city to demonstrate the dynamic power of Jesus.

➔ Have you ever seen the message about Jesus accompanied by a “demonstration of the Spirit’s power”? If so, share the story with your group.

➔ Paul says that the “cross of Christ” is “emptied of its power” when the message about Jesus is presented in a way that appeals to human wisdom—to human ideas about what’s smart and sophisticated. What would that kind of portrayal look like in your culture? How would this rob the cross of its power?

➔ Does Paul’s assertion that God has turned the wisdom of this world into foolishness mean that followers of Jesus shouldn’t pursue an education? Does Paul’s description of the Corinthian believers imply that God doesn’t use people who are well-educated, in influential positions, or from prominent families?

2 Paul goes on to say that “we do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature.” Once we understand this true *wisdom*—divine wisdom—we can appreciate how “the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.” The centerpiece of the message about Jesus, his death on the cross, doesn’t make sense according to human wisdom. If God really did send Jesus as the promised deliverer, why did God allow him to be killed by his enemies? How can defeat be victory? How can weakness be strength? These paradoxical truths can only be understood through divine wisdom.

➔ Work together as a group to explain the paradox of the cross, how what appeared to be a great defeat was actually a supreme victory. (Explain it as best you can at this point; in future sessions

you'll hear Paul explain more about the meaning of what Jesus did for us.)

3 Paul uses the analogies of a field and a building to explain that he and his fellow teachers are not rivals. One person might plant seeds in a field and someone else might water them, but despite their different responsibilities, they're still working together. Similarly, one person might lay a foundation, and someone else might build on it, but they're also working together. These analogies illustrate that the community of Jesus' followers in Corinth has an organic unity that no one should destroy: "God's temple is sacred, and you together are that temple."

➤ Who are some of the leading personalities who have a following among the believers in your culture? Which ones best live out Paul's teaching by portraying themselves as coworkers with other prominent leaders, rather than emphasizing their own distinctive positions and methods?

➤ What issues have been causes of division in the Christian communities you're familiar with? Could these divisions be overcome by recognizing that people on "opposing sides" are actually expressing the same deep truths in ways that differ only on the surface?

4 Paul discerned that pride ultimately lay behind the divisions in Corinth. The believers there were "puffed up": They thought they were pretty smart and sophisticated, since they could recognize who the best teacher was. Many of them seem to have felt they were too good to be associated with Paul, since he wasn't classically trained in rhetoric ("I did not come with eloquence"). Paul urges them to look past his own personal weaknesses, past any earthly attainments they might have, and past the position of spiritual privilege they believed they had, and recognize him as their spiritual father. He asks them, as his "dear children," to follow his example of relying not on his own persuasiveness or force of personality, but on God's power.

➤ Think about the personal attributes, abilities, and attainments you're grateful that God has given you. Ask yourself, in Paul's words, "What do you have that you did not receive? . . . Why do you boast as though you did not?" As a group, pray together and give thanks for the gifts God has given to each person, and ask that they'd be able to put them humbly at God's disposal for his work. Pray that each person would be delivered from a pride in these gifts that would cause broken relationships among Jesus' followers.

NOTE

When Paul says in this section, "Already . . . you have begun to reign," he's echoing a phrase the Corinthians used to express their own sense of spiritual privilege. In the sessions ahead, we'll hear more about why they felt so privileged, and we'll see how Paul needed to warn and correct them about this.

THE “ALREADY” AND THE “NOT YET” OUT OF BALANCE IN CORINTH

1 Corinthians > Things Paul Heard About > Toleration of Immorality
 1 Corinthians > Things Paul Heard About > Lawsuits between Believers
 1 Corinthians > Things Paul Heard About > Believers Going to Prostitutes

INTRODUCTION

As Paul continues his letter, he addresses three more situations he’s heard about. He says specifically that the first has been “reported” to him. We can infer that the others were as well, since it’s only after addressing them that Paul says, “Now for the matters you wrote about.” These three problems all arose from a failure to balance two vital truths.

The first truth is expressed in the Corinthians’ confidence, noted at the end of our last session, that they had already “begun to reign.” This was their way of saying that they were already enjoying some of the privileges that would be completely theirs when the coming age fully arrived. Paul writes in his letters about two different “ages.” Here in 1 Corinthians he refers several times to “this age.” In Galatians he will call it “this present evil age.” In Romans he will contrast “present things” with “things to come” (NIV “the present” and “the future”). The essential contrast is between this age and the coming age, because the age that will replace this one is already

arriving now. In other words, these two ages are not two distinct periods of time, but rather two sets of conditions that people can live under. The coming age is the sphere in which God’s authority is recognized and honored. When it arrives fully, God’s authority will be definitively established throughout the earth.

Paul did teach that *some* of the realities of this coming age were *already* being anticipated. However, this truth had to be balanced with a complementary one, the recognition that the coming age had *not yet* fully arrived. The Corinthians were having three problems because they were either trying to live too much in the “already” (like the Thessalonians who felt they were “above” working for a living because Christ had already returned spiritually), or else because they were lingering too far behind in the “not yet.” Paul’s counsel to them expresses his understanding that followers of Jesus have to live carefully in the tension between the “already” and the “not yet.”

READING AND DISCUSSION

1 Have someone read how Paul addresses a situation of open immorality in Corinth, beginning, “It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you,” and ending, “Expel the wicked person from among you.”

A man within the community was married to, or living with, a woman who had previously been married to his father. Paul’s wording suggests that this wasn’t the man’s biological mother. Nevertheless, this would have been considered such an outrageous case of incest that not even “pagans” (Gentiles, who didn’t have the moral and ethical teachings of the law of Moses) would tolerate it. But the Corinthians were “proud” to have this man in their midst. Why?

The Corinthians believed they had *already* become so “spiritual” that what people did in their physical bodies didn’t affect them. They were pointing to the man who was committing incest and saying, “See? We’re so spiritual that we can have this in our community without any problem.” Paul cautions them, “Your boasting is not good.” They were *not yet* beyond the influence of sin, as they thought. He warns that “a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough.” Any kind of immorality by those who “claim to be a brother or

sister" can quickly spread by providing an excuse and an example to others. And so Paul orders the Corinthians to "shun" this man, just as he told the Thessalonians to "shun" those who wouldn't work.

➤ What measures have you seen communities of Jesus' followers take in response to people who "claim to be fellow believers" but live in a way that brings public shame on the faith? What effect did these measures have? What, if anything, would you like to have seen done differently?

➤ Have you ever seen a community fail to exercise discipline when you thought it should have? What was the result?

2 Have another person read Paul's discussion of lawsuits between believers. It begins, "If any of you has a dispute with another . . ." and ends, "you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God."

(Note: In this section, as Paul tries to discourage the kind of dishonest dealings that's leading to lawsuits in the first place, he includes "swindlers" on a list of people who will not "inherit the kingdom of God," that is, people who are not living in the way characteristic of those who are already experiencing the realities of the coming age. "Men who have sex with men" are among the others on this list. We'll look in more detail at Paul's understanding of homosexuality in session 23.)

In another part of their community life, the Corinthians were living too far behind in the "not yet." When they had disputes, they were suing one another, asking secular courts and judges to award them settlements against their brothers and sisters in the faith. This was an embarrassment to their community and to Jesus' reputation in the city. Paul argues that since, in the coming age, God's people will "judge the world" and even "judge angels" (what this means is not entirely clear), some of them should *already* be "wise enough to judge a dispute between believers."

➤ Have you ever witnessed a situation where, for the sake of Jesus' reputation, one believer decided *not* to sue another? What alternatives did they pursue? How did things turn out?

➤ Do you agree or disagree with this statement? "A follower of Jesus should never sue a fellow believer, even if they end up being 'wronged' or 'defrauded.'" Explain your answer. (There are some observations at the end of this session that you can interact with after you've shared your own thoughts.)

3 Have someone read Paul's explanation of why the Corinthian believers shouldn't visit prostitutes. It begins, "I have the right to do anything, you say," and ends, "Therefore honor God with your bodies."

Worship in the pagan temples of this time included participation in ritual prostitution. The Corinthians had developed some slogans to justify having sex with temple prostitutes.

They said, for one thing, "I have the right to do anything." (The word translated "right" here is the Greek term *exousia*, which means having the power or authority to do something.) The Corinthians felt their status as "spiritual" people, who were *already* living in the coming age, gave them the power and authority to engage in any earthly activity without being affected by it. Paul warns them to be careful: these activities may actually "master" them (that is, enslave them). They aren't really free "to do anything" if they're not able to *resist* going to prostitutes.

The Corinthians were also saying, "Food for the stomach and the stomach for food, and God will destroy them both." In other words, "It doesn't matter what we eat, because these physical bodies are just going to pass away. What really matters is our spirits." The analogy was obvious: "Sex for the body and the body for sex, because God will destroy them both . . ." As we'll see later in this letter, Paul agrees that believers are generally free to eat whatever they want. But he disagrees that an analogy can be drawn from this to justify sexual license. He explains that sex does affect the spirit, because it's an act of spiritual union with another person. It joins two human spirits in a single

shared body ("The two will become one flesh"). This is why it's only supposed to take place within marriage. How then can believers, who are already one with Jesus, unite themselves and Jesus to pagan temple prostitutes?

Paul also explains that God will not, in fact, destroy the body. Instead, God will raise believers' bodies from the dead, just as he raised Jesus. So the Corinthians' appeal to what will happen in the coming age is not valid. Temple prostitution, and by implication any sex outside marriage, is not permissible.

- ➔ How are sexual relations generally understood within your culture? How does this understanding compare with the one explained here in Paul's letter?
- ➔ Have the men and women in your group discuss this question separately: If a person accepts the understanding of sexual relations explained here, what can help them follow it today? What kinds of personal disciplines, accountability relationships, and ways of thinking about the meaning and purpose of sex would be helpful?

NOTE

Observations in response to discussion point 2 in section 2: Followers of Jesus might see this question in two different ways. Some would be concerned that the demands of justice be honored, so that someone who says they follow Jesus shouldn't be allowed to defraud another person flagrantly. Others might say that modeling Christlike sacrifice and non-resistance could help another person realize that they need to change their ways.

PAUL'S COUNSEL TO THE CORINTHIANS ABOUT MARRIAGE

1 Corinthians > Things the Corinthians Wrote About > Abstinence within Marriage
1 Corinthians > Things the Corinthians Wrote About > Whether to Get Married

INTRODUCTION

Paul now turns to answer some questions the Corinthians have asked in their most recent letter to him.

The first is whether it wouldn't be good for married couples to abstain from sexual relations. Ironically, even while the Corinthians thought they were so "spiritual" they could visit prostitutes without being affected, they also seemed to believe that sex within marriage was tying them down to the physical world. So, many of them had started going without it. Some were divorcing or separating from their spouses, particularly if the spouses were not believers.

Because of these same concerns, they also asked Paul whether those who were engaged should honor the promise they'd made to marry another person, or whether it would be better for them spiritually not to get married.

Paul responds to these questions in this next section of his letter.

READING

Have three people read these parts of Paul's counsel to the Corinthians about marriage:

- Paul's response to their question about abstinence, beginning, "Now for the matters you wrote about."
- His advice about separation and divorce, beginning, "Now to the unmarried and the widows I say . . ."
- His guidance to couples who are engaged, beginning, "Now about virgins," and ending, "I think that I too have the Spirit of God."

DISCUSSION

1 Paul tells the Corinthians they shouldn't practice sexual abstinence within marriage, because they might be tempted to "sexual immorality" outside of marriage. Moreover, a husband or wife doesn't really have the "authority" to deny sex generally to their spouse. ("Authority" here is *exousia*, the same word translated as "right" in the phrase, "I have the right to do anything.") When the two become "one flesh," each spouse gives the other the rights to their body.

This doesn't mean a married person can't ever decline sex on a specific occasion for personal reasons. Sex within marriage must always be with the free consent of both spouses. In addition, as Paul notes, couples may agree to abstain for a certain time for a specific purpose, such as for a season of prayer. (This would be similar to fasting.) So a spouse can say "no" at times to sex in marriage. But they can't say "never."

Implicit in Paul's counsel here is a rejection of the Corinthians' idea that marital sex, as a physical act, ties down people's spirits. Paul refers to marriage as a "gift from God" (a *charisma*, the same word he uses for "gifts of the Spirit" later in this letter). Marriage is an uplifting spiritual union in itself.

- ➡ A young married couple you know tells you that they, and some others they've met over the Internet, are seriously considering

joining the last surviving Shaker community at Sabbathday Lake, Maine, to keep the Shakers from dying out. Even though married, they would have to practice celibacy, but they explain, "We admire so many of the Shakers' historic distinctives, like craftsmanship, equality, adoption, pacifism, and creation care, that we're not going to second-guess them on this one." You attended this couple's wedding and were witnesses of their vows. What do you tell them?

2 Paul also gives advice about separation and divorce. As he does, sometimes he says he has a "command from the Lord," meaning a teaching passed down from Jesus, but other times he makes clear he's giving his own opinion, "as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy."

The command from Jesus is that husbands and wives should not divorce or separate. Presumably this applies to situations where both spouses are believers, because Paul then takes up the situation of a believer who is married to an unbeliever. (This was the first generation of Christianity, so these would be cases where an already-married person had chosen to follow Jesus, but their spouse hadn't. Paul never sanctions a believer marrying an unbeliever; he says that a Christian widow, for example, can only marry someone who "belongs to the Lord.")

Paul advises that the believing spouse should not initiate a divorce or separation. They are "sanctifying" their spouse and their children (that is, they're bringing a positive spiritual influence to bear on them). However, if the unbelieving spouse wants to leave—if they simply don't want to live with a person who's a follower of Jesus—then the believer should let them go, because "God has called us to live in peace." In general, Paul says, each person should try to live out their faith in the situation they were in when they came to believe. But they should also be on the lookout for ways God might let them improve their situation.

- ➡ Should a person who's a follower of Jesus date someone who isn't? Explain.

➔ A woman who was divorced before she became a follower of Jesus comes to you for advice. She's met a Christian man and he seems serious about her. She's wondering whether she's free, in the eyes of God, to accept if he proposes. She's been reading Paul's comments here and has some questions about them. Does God want her to be "reconciled to her [former] husband"? Is she supposed to stay unmarried, because that was her "situation" when God called her? Or would marriage to this new man be the kind of improvement to that situation God might permit? What do you tell her?

➔ If any members of your group are separated or divorced, let them share some of their hurts and struggles, if they feel comfortable doing so, and pray together for them.

3 Finally, Paul gives his advice to those Corinthians who are engaged. He does this in light of the *already* aspect of the kingdom of God. "The time is short," he argues, and "this world in its present form is passing away." Specifically, he says, followers of Jesus are experiencing a "present crisis." Paul may be referring to the way they're being persecuted, or to a special season of both danger and opportunity that's accompanying the rapid growth of Christian communities in the empire. Paul points out that those who remain unmarried will be able to pursue the "Lord's affairs" more single-mindedly during this "crisis." And so, while he doesn't portray marriage itself as something that "ties down" the spirit, and while he affirms that individual callings will differ, he encourages those who are engaged to wait before getting married, if they have sufficient self-control.

➔ Today, under what circumstances might an engaged couple choose to delay marriage because of the "Lord's affairs"?

➔ Throughout this section Paul has praised singleness. Like marriage, he calls singleness a gift (*charisma*) from God. He says, "I wish that all of you were [single] as I am," and even suggests

that at times singleness is preferable to marriage: "he who marries . . . does right, but he who does not marry . . . does better." How does your circle of friends and your Christian community regard and treat people who are single?

Have four people read these parts of Paul's answer, beginning:

- ★ “Now about food sacrificed to idols.”
- ★ “Am I not free? Am I not an apostle?”
- ★ “For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact . . . that our ancestors . . .”
- ★ “‘I have the right to do anything,’ you say.” End with, “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.” (If you have a different translation, this last section might begin something like, “‘All things are lawful’” and end, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.”)

PAUL'S COUNSEL ABOUT EATING FOOD OFFERED TO IDOLS

1 Corinthians > Things the Corinthians Wrote About > Food Offered to Idols

INTRODUCTION

The Corinthians also asked Paul why they shouldn't be able to eat meals in the temples of their city, where food was served that had been ceremonially offered to idols. “Everybody knows that an idol isn't a real god,” they argued, “so what's the harm?” While these meals were cultural and social events, they also had a religious character. The Corinthians saw this as another opportunity to demonstrate how “spiritual” they were, by participating in what was essentially worship at a pagan temple without having this affect their relationship with God.

Paul answers their question in several stages. He agrees that idols aren't real gods, but he still asks the Corinthians to consider how their actions might influence those who are “weak.” Next, he uses himself as an example of giving up rights for the sake of others. He then warns the Corinthians that by eating food offered to idols, they're running greater spiritual risks than they realize. Finally, he gives advice about how they can take a practical and balanced approach to the issue.

DISCUSSION

1 Paul explains that some followers of Jesus are “still so accustomed to idols that when they eat sacrificial food they think of it as having been sacrificed to a god.” Paul calls such people “weak,” not in a physical sense, and not in the sense of being unable to resist actual sin, but in the sense of being superstitious, or “believing too much.” These people think that idols really are gods, but they're not. If a person like this sees a fellow believer participating in a temple feast, this might lead them to do the same, even though this would violate their conscience, and they'd feel they were betraying their loyalty to Jesus. “Be careful,” Paul warns those who want to eat in idols' temples, “that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak.”

- ☞ Is there anything you're uncomfortable eating or drinking on religious grounds? Would you prefer that other believers not eat or drink it in your presence?

➔ Do you agree or disagree with this statement? “The stronger a person becomes in their relationship with Jesus, the more religious taboos they will abandon.” Explain your answer. (There are some observations about this question at the end of this session that you can interact with.)

2 Paul acknowledges that he’s asking the Corinthians not to make full use of their “right” to eat food offered to idols. (This is once again the word *exousia*, meaning power or authority.) But he explains that people who are willing to give up their “rights” can potentially have a much greater impact than those who aren’t. Paul himself was able to start a community of Jesus’ followers in Corinth because he didn’t insist on going only where he could “receive [his] living from the gospel,” even though he had this right. In order to move freely in different circles, when among Jews Paul gave up his right to eat whatever he wanted, but when among Gentiles he didn’t insist on being served kosher food.

➔ Have you, or has someone you know, accepted cultural limitations in order to represent Jesus more effectively to a specific group of people? Tell the story if you’re free to.

3 The Corinthians seemed to feel that baptism and communion gave them a spiritual immunity, so that they had “the right to do anything” without worrying about how it would affect their relationship with God. Paul explains that the Israelites in the wilderness had the equivalents of baptism and communion, but most of them nevertheless experienced divine judgments because of things they did. This suggests that there really is no “sacramental immunity,” so the Corinthians should be careful not to “arouse the Lord’s jealousy.” That’s what they’ll do if they participate in ceremonial meals in temples, Paul insists. While *idols* aren’t real gods, the *worship* that’s offered to idols is received by dark spiritual forces—demons. So followers of Jesus must have no part in it.

➔ What do you think of this statement? “Real worship always connects with something spiritual. If people are really worshipping,

but not addressing the true God, then their worship will find its way to evil supernatural beings.”

4 Paul suggests a practical approach the Corinthians can take to the question of food offered to idols. Since idols aren’t real gods, nothing magical happens to the food when it’s offered to them. It doesn’t carry any spiritual force with it afterwards. So the Corinthians can freely eat anything sold in the markets or served to them in friends’ homes. However, if a fellow believer protests that this food has been offered to idols, for that person’s sake they shouldn’t eat it. And, as Paul has argued, they also shouldn’t go to the temples and participate in meals there.

➔ You’ve been having some great conversations about faith with a Hindu friend. They’ve visited your church with you a couple of times. Now they invite you to a Hindu cultural festival where you can meet their family and friends. At the festival priests are going around painting red circles on everyone’s forehead. Your friend explains that this is a gesture of welcome and a way for an older person to wish a blessing on a younger person. But you’ve also heard that it’s a religious symbol of spiritual illumination. Do you accept the gesture?

NOTE

Observations in response to discussion point 2 in section 1: Here in 1 Corinthians, Paul says people are “weak” in their faith if they think they’ll be hurt spiritually by eating or drinking certain things, or by doing particular activities on the Sabbath or religious holidays. The stronger their faith in Jesus becomes, the more they’ll give up their superstitions. They’ll realize, Paul says, that everything belongs to God, and they’ll “take part . . . with thankfulness” in the food, drink, and days that God has created. However, mature believers who are “strong” in the faith may also develop specific convictions about what activities they do and don’t want to participate in. While these may still look like “taboos,” they’re not fearful superstitions, but settled convictions.

PAUL'S CONCERNS ABOUT TWO WORSHIP PRACTICES

1 Corinthians > Things Paul Heard About > Head Coverings

1 Corinthians > Things Paul Heard About > The Lord's Supper

INTRODUCTION

Paul is about to take up another topic the Corinthians have written to him about: the use of spiritual gifts in worship. But before he does, he expresses his concerns about a couple of things he'd heard the Corinthians are doing in their worship gatherings. He addresses these topics here, rather than in the earlier part of his letter, because they relate to worship, which will be the context for his discussion of spiritual gifts.

READING AND DISCUSSION

1 Have someone read Paul's teaching about head coverings, which begins, "I praise you for remembering me in everything" and ends "we have no other practice—nor do the churches of God."

This is a particularly controversial and difficult passage. Many interpreters believe Paul is telling women they need to wear a head covering while

in worship, specifically when praying or prophesying. However, when Paul comes to make his main assertion, he actually says, "A woman ought to have *authority* [*exousia*, rights] over her own head." Based on what this word means everywhere else in this letter, Paul is actually saying that a woman should have the right to decide for herself whether to wear a head covering or not. (As we've seen repeatedly, the word *exousia* means authority exercised, not authority submitted to, so Paul's meaning is not that a veil is a "sign of being under authority.")

If Paul's main assertion is that women should be *free to decide*, then the Corinthians were perhaps *not allowing* women to wear head coverings in their worship gatherings. Their reasons for forbidding veils seem to have been related to a belief that woman was created before man and therefore came more directly from God. The Corinthians apparently felt that women should express this more direct relation by not having anything on their heads, that is, between themselves and God above. Paul is likely correcting this idea when he explains, "Man did not come from woman, but woman from man." His assertion that "the head of the woman is man" may indicate something similar and be intended to challenge the connection the Corinthians were drawing between head coverings and the order of creation. (Much of their reasoning is no longer clear from our cultural distance.)

Paul also argues for women's freedom by showing that a ban on veils is inconsistent with another decision the Corinthians have already reached, that women shouldn't shave their heads. In this culture, women would shave off their hair to offer it as a sacrifice or in payment of a vow. "If you really don't want women to have anything on their heads," Paul asks ironically, "why not let them go all the way and shave all their hair off?"

It's important to realize that while Paul does want the Corinthians at least to get their story straight about who was created first, he doesn't actually consider this issue important for relationships within the community of Jesus' followers. "In the Lord," he says, men and women are interdependent, "for as woman came from man" (originally), "so also man is born of woman" (ever since), and ultimately "everything comes from God."

☞ If you'd previously heard the interpretation that Paul required women to wear veils, does the possibility that he was actually

arguing for women's freedom on this issue change the way you think and feel about him? How, or why not?

➤ You've taught your teenage daughter, based on this passage, that a woman's long hair is her "glory" and "covering." She's grown her hair long, and you think it looks just beautiful. But now, in response to an appeal from the "Locks of Love" program (www.locksoflove.org), she wants to cut her hair and donate it to children who are suffering from medical hair loss. Do you allow this? Explain.

➤ Many European countries have passed, or are considering, legislation to forbid Muslim women from wearing full veils in public. What principles from this passage could be cited to support or oppose such legislation?

2 Have someone read Paul's instructions about the Lord's Supper, beginning with, "In the following directives I have no praise for you," and ending, "And when I come I will give further directions."

In New Testament times, communities of Jesus' followers met in the evening and shared a full meal together. The Lord's Supper was served during this meal. At this gathering the rich could share from their abundance so the poor could enjoy a good meal. But in Corinth, the rich were feasting together in the home of the person who hosted the gathering, while the poor ate their own meager fare out in the courtyard. "As a result," Paul observes tersely, "one person remains hungry and another gets drunk."

Paul is outraged. He says the rich are "despising the church of God by humiliating those who have nothing." Many of them, he declares, are experiencing divine judgments of sickness and even death because of this. He explains again that the Lord's Supper is a solemn observance "in remembrance" of Jesus. Those who share in it must "discern the body of Christ"—they must appreciate the meal's spiritual significance, and they must recognize and

honor the other members of their community. And so, Paul insists, "When you gather to eat, you should all eat together."

➤ What are some of the most meaningful experiences you've had participating in the Lord's Supper? What do you like most about the way your own Christian community observes it? What is the point of observing it?

➤ Have you ever had a bad experience with the Lord's Supper? If so, share it if you're free to.

➤ In most places today, the Lord's Supper isn't used directly to feed the poor. But in some communities of Jesus' followers, people use it as an occasion to collect donations for local food banks or to receive gifts to be used for international relief and development. Have you ever been part of a group that did this? Talk about your experience.

PAUL'S COUNSEL TO THE CORINTHIANS ABOUT SPIRITUAL GIFTS

1 Corinthians > Things the Corinthians Wrote About > Spiritual Gifts

INTRODUCTION

In their letter the Corinthians also asked Paul about spiritual gifts, the special abilities the Holy Spirit gives to believers in Jesus. They all wanted to have one specific gift, the ability to speak in a language they hadn't learned. (In many translations of the Bible this is called "speaking in tongues," but "tongue" simply means "language.") But the Corinthians had a concern about this gift: some in their community were using it to say things like "Jesus be cursed." Was this a special revelation that there was something wrong with Jesus? Or was there something wrong with this gift? Paul answers their specific question and then discusses at length spiritual gifts and their use.

READING

Have one person read the opening part of Paul's answer, beginning, "Now about the gifts of the Spirit, brothers and sisters . . ."

Have someone else read the next part, where Paul emphasizes the "way of love," beginning, "And yet I will show you the most excellent way." (If you're

using a translation that has chapters and verses, this begins at the end of a chapter, so don't let the chapter break confuse you.)

Have another person read Paul's encouragement to seek gifts that build others up, beginning, "Follow the way of love and eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit."

Finally, have someone read Paul's concluding practical instructions, beginning, "What then shall we say, brothers and sisters?" and ending, "Everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way."

DISCUSSION

1 Paul explains that those who were saying things like "Jesus be cursed" were speaking under the influence of the dark forces behind the "idols" they had formerly worshipped. This shows how spiritually dangerous it is to seek a special ability for its own sake, without regard to its source. There is a legitimate gift of "tongues," but there are also counterfeits.

Once Paul has given this explanation and warning, he encourages the Corinthians to discern which of a variety of gifts the Spirit wants to give them. He explains that just as the human body requires a variety of specialized parts, so the "body of Christ" needs the full range of spiritual gifts to fulfill its purpose.

- ➡ How comfortable are you with the idea that supernatural entities, both good and evil, can work through people by giving them special abilities? Would you like to move (cautiously) into this area more, seeking the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, or stay as far away from it as possible? Explain your answer.
- ➡ Have you ever seen one spiritual gift or ability privileged above all others? If so, which gift was it? What gifts would you say are most needed to complement this one in those places where it's been promoted exclusively?

➔ What would you say are your own strongest spiritual gifts?

2 Paul's poetic meditation on the character of love is one of his most famous writings. It's often read at weddings. But its original purpose was to encourage people to pursue not special abilities for themselves but love for others. It shows that love is not essentially a romantic feeling, but a generous, considerate, upbuilding way of life.

➔ Which of the characteristics of love that Paul describes would you most like to have more of in your life right now? Why?

3 Paul is particularly concerned about how the Corinthians have been using spiritual gifts in their worship gatherings. They've all been speaking in unknown languages, so no one's been getting anything out of what they say. He encourages them instead to "prophesy," meaning not to predict the future, but rather to "speak to people for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort."

➔ Paul says that worship gatherings can bring such insight and conviction that inquirers and unbelievers will exclaim, "God is really among you!" Have you had an experience in a worship gathering that convinced you God was genuinely present there? If so, share your story with the group.

4 As he did in his discussion of food offered to idols, Paul concludes with some practical recommendations. He encourages everyone to contribute something to each worship gathering. But if people do "speak in tongues," this should be one at a time and only if their words can be interpreted and explained. A few people can prophesy, also taking turns, while the others "weigh carefully what is said." This will make sure that everything is done "in a fitting and orderly way."

➔ Have you ever been in a worship gathering where everyone was encouraged to contribute something, whether by singing or requesting a song, reading a Scripture, sharing personal

reflections, or offering a challenge to the group? If so, describe the experience. Would you like to see your current community try something like this?

NOTE

Paul's instructions here include a requirement that women "remain silent." He can't mean that women aren't allowed to say anything at all in the community gatherings, because he's just told the Corinthians, addressing men and women together, that "*each of you*" should make some contribution and that "*you can all prophesy.*" Earlier in the letter he took for granted that women would "pray" and "prophesy" in worship gatherings; the only issue was whether they could wear a veil when they did. So this restriction must apply only to some specific case. Since Paul says that women should "ask their own husbands at home" if they want to "inquire about something" (literally "learn something"), it's most likely that he's requiring them to "remain silent" if they'd otherwise be treating the worship gathering as a kind of school room. Paul isn't discouraging women from speaking or learning; he just wants them to learn "in a fitting and orderly way."

1 Take turns reading, a paragraph at a time, through Paul's discussion of the resurrection, beginning, "Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you," and ending, "You know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain."

Paul defends the reality of the resurrection by showing how central Jesus' own resurrection is to everything that's proclaimed about him. "If Christ has not been raised," he observes pointedly, "our preaching is useless and so is your faith." As he did when discussing head coverings, Paul shows that the Corinthians' position is inconsistent with one of their own practices. The very people who were denying the resurrection were also being baptized on behalf of the dead. It made no sense to perform this bodily act for them if their bodies were gone forever. (But Paul isn't endorsing the practice of baptism for the dead.)

To answer the challenge about what kind of body people are raised in, Paul observes that "not all flesh is the same." Created matter can have different types of "splendor." The Corinthians mustn't think that a resurrected body will be the same "natural" one that people have before death. It will have much greater splendor; it will be a "spiritual body." This is a paradoxical idea, but Paul illustrates it through an analogy. A wheat seed and a wheat plant are both wheat, but what comes up from the ground is very different from what went into the ground.

- ➡ If Jesus wasn't bodily raised from the dead, what would this take away from Christianity, as you understand it?
- ➡ If you could make a recommendation to God about features to incorporate in the "spiritual body" of the resurrection, what would you suggest?

2 Have someone read Paul's instructions about the collection, beginning, "Now about the collection for the Lord's people."

PAUL DEFENDS THE RESURRECTION AND ARRANGES FOR A COLLECTION

1 Corinthians > Things the Corinthians Wrote About > The Resurrection
1 Corinthians > Things the Corinthians Wrote About > The Collection for the Poor
1 Corinthians > Conclusion

INTRODUCTION

In their letter the Corinthians also asked Paul to defend the belief that God would raise followers of Jesus from the dead. Some in Corinth were denying the resurrection, probably influenced by the general outlook of Greek philosophy, which saw spirit as good and matter as bad. Once the spirit had escaped the "prison" of the body, why would God ever put it back in again? Those who denied the resurrection challenged Paul to explain how it worked: "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?" In response, Paul first defends the resurrection generally and then answers these specific questions.

A final matter the Corinthians asked about was a collection of money the churches in Macedonia, Achaia, and Asia Minor were taking to help impoverished believers in Judea. Paul offers some practical suggestions about this before concluding his letter.

Paul's comments here are often used to encourage people to give money to their local churches. But they're originally intended to instruct the Corinthians to set aside a portion of their income regularly to give to the poor. The followers of Jesus living in Macedonia and Achaia had agreed to take a collection to help their fellow believers in Judea, who were living in long-term poverty. Paul advises each of the Corinthians to set aside their money weekly, prior to his coming, "so that when I come no collections will have to be made." We'll hear much more about this collection in 2 Corinthians.

➔ When you give to organizations that help the poor in your community and around the world, do you typically give whatever you have on hand in response to special appeals, or do you regularly set aside money throughout the year to give to them? Why do you follow your particular approach?

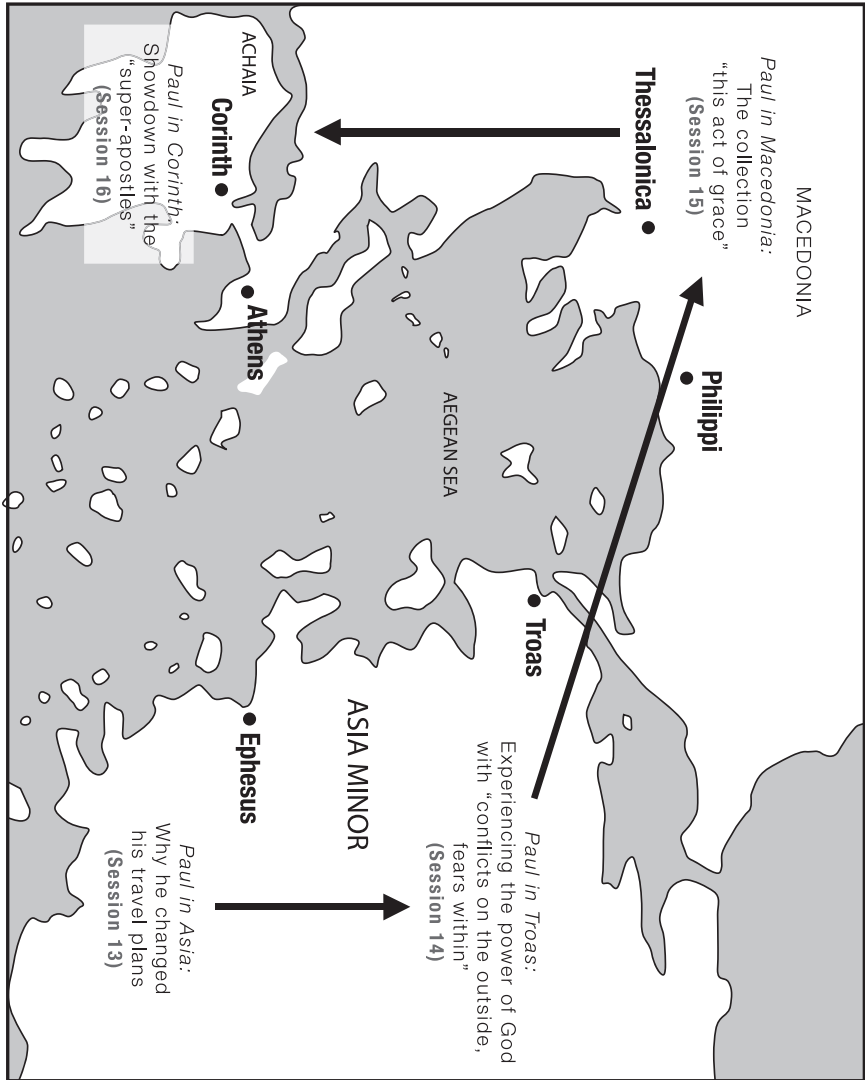
3 Have another person read the rest of the letter, beginning, "After I go through Macedonia, I will come to you."

➔ Now that you've read and discussed all of 1 Corinthians, what were your favorite parts? What did you learn that you didn't know before? What insights did the letter give you that you can apply to questions or problems in your own life?

FOR YOUR NEXT MEETING

At your next meeting, group members will be asked to compose and share some dramatic monologues. If possible, have materials available to help them do this, such as laptop computers, paper and pencils, etc.

PAUL'S THIRD JOURNEY, CONTINUED AND 2 CORINTHIANS OUTLINE



2 CORINTHIANS

EXPERIENCING 2 CORINTHIANS AS A WHOLE

INTRODUCTION

At the end of 1 Corinthians, Paul explained how he planned to pick up the collection for the poor. He specified, “After I go through Macedonia, I will come to you.” The Corinthians were therefore surprised when Paul came to see them *before* going to Macedonia. They were also embarrassed. They hadn’t been “setting aside a sum of money” each week, so they had nothing to contribute. Defensively, they accused Paul of going back on his word. One man in particular seems to have angrily criticized him, challenging his authority and integrity. Although Paul had said he wanted to stay in Corinth “for a while” when he came, he went back abruptly to Ephesus. He said he’d return to Corinth once their collection was ready and then go on and pick up the contributions from Macedonia.

From Ephesus Paul sent his coworker Titus back to Corinth with a sharply-worded letter of rebuke. He demanded that the man who challenged him be disciplined. Before Paul heard back from Titus, rioting broke out in Ephesus against the followers of Jesus and Paul had to flee for his own safety. He went to Troas, expecting to meet Titus there on his way back from Corinth. (See the map and outline on page 62.) When he didn’t, he continued

on into Macedonia, where he found Titus and learned that the Corinthians had reaffirmed their respect for his authority and disciplined the man who challenged him.

But Titus also reported a new threat. Some traveling Jewish teachers had come to Corinth, bearing impressive letters of introduction. They called themselves “super-apostles,” although Paul suspected they were only “masquerading as apostles of Christ.” Nevertheless, they and their followers were demanding that Paul demonstrate his own credentials if he wanted to continue being recognized as a leader worth listening to.

So Paul had to address several challenges before he could finally return to Corinth. He had to assure the Corinthians that the conflict of his first visit was behind them. He had to explain why he was now coming to see them *after* going to Macedonia—reversing himself once again. He still needed to help them arrange for the collection. And he had to meet the threat of the “super-apostles.” Paul did all of these things in the letter we know as 2 Corinthians (which is at least the fourth letter he wrote to them).

READING

Read together through 2 Corinthians. This should take about 45 minutes. It’s right after 1 Corinthians, on pages 1539–48, in *The Books of The Bible*. If you’re using another edition of the Scriptures, you’ll also find this letter right after 1 Corinthians.

Take turns reading out loud. Change readers whenever you come to what feels like a natural break. Note any words or phrases you don’t understand and discuss them afterwards.

As you read, notice how 2 Corinthians is written in the form of a letter. You can follow its outline on page 62. Notice how it’s written in the form of a letter. Also note how Paul addresses his four major topics by envisioning himself in four different locations: Ephesus, Troas, Macedonia, and Corinth. He recalls what his relationship with the Corinthians was like, or anticipates what it will be like, in each place, and speaks to them from that perspective.

DISCUSSION

- ➔ What things that Paul says in 2 Corinthians struck you the most? Why? (Everyone in the group should be encouraged to share at least one thing.)

- ➔ Form three teams to write two- to three-minute monologues as described below. Each team should choose one of its members to deliver the monologue once it's written:
 - What the angry man said to Paul when he came to Corinth unexpectedly
 - The report Titus gave when Paul caught up with him in Macedonia
 - What the “super-apostles” said about themselves and Paul that led the Corinthians to ask for his credentials

- ➔ Where in the world today is there violence or rioting against Christians? If you've seen photos or videos of these incidents, try to picture Paul as one of the people under attack. Does this affect the way you think about him? How, or why not?

SESSION 13

CAN PAUL'S WORD BE TRUSTED?

2 Corinthians > Paul in Asia

INTRODUCTION

Paul's first challenge as he writes again to the Corinthians is to lay to rest the painful misunderstanding caused by the change in his travel plans. He does this in the first part of his letter. Even though he's now in Macedonia, he writes in this section from the perspective of the time when he was in Ephesus (in the province of Asia) and in danger from violent persecution.

By now there's more confusion to clear up. After his uncomfortable visit to Corinth, Paul promised he'd return there before going to Macedonia. But now, as he writes to the Corinthians, he's actually coming back from Macedonia. Paul needs to explain why he changed his plans in the first place, and why he's changed them yet again.

READING

Have one person read this opening section of 2 Corinthians for the group, beginning at the start of the letter and ending, “For we are not unaware of his schemes.”

DISCUSSION

1 As we've seen, letters in the ancient world included an opening thanking that the sender used to describe something they were grateful for about the recipients. But in this case, Paul praises and thanks God directly for his compassion and comfort. He explains that these are overflowing in his life and giving him something to share with the Corinthians in their own troubles.

➔ Have you ever, as Paul describes, been able to comfort others in circumstances similar to yours, with comfort you've received from God? If so, share your story with the group.

2 Paul hasn't had the chance yet to tell his friends in Corinth about his narrow escape from death in Ephesus, so he does that here. At the end of 1 Corinthians he'd talked about the resurrection as a future event. Here at the beginning of 2 Corinthians he explains how he's experienced it as a present reality. He discovered that to escape from "deadly peril," he had to rely not on himself but on "God, who raises the dead."

➔ Have you ever felt "great pressure" in a situation that was "far beyond" you, but discovered you could rely on God to see you through? If so, share your story with the group.

3 To reassure the Corinthians of his integrity, Paul insists that he doesn't make and announce his plans in a "fickle" way, saying both "Yes, yes" and "No, no" in the same breath. He had good reasons for changing his travel plans both times.

Paul insists that if he said one thing while meaning another, he couldn't represent God. God keeps his promises, fulfilling them in Christ. In fact, he says, God has given us a "deposit," a guarantee that he will fulfill all of his promises, by putting the Holy Spirit in our hearts.

The "deposit" that Paul talks about is a "down payment," the first part of the purchase price for goods or services. It gives the provider the assurance that the recipient will continue paying until the full price is met, because the

recipient has already made a significant investment. People don't like to pay out money and then have nothing to show for it!

➔ If you're a follower of Jesus, in what ways are you aware of the Holy Spirit's presence and activity in your life? (For example, do you find that your likes and dislikes are steadily changing, so that they're more like the ones the Bible says believers should have? Is it easier for you to forgive people who've wronged you, and to love people you couldn't have before? Do good ideas occur to you about wise courses of action to follow in life, ideas you couldn't have come up with on your own? Are you better able to understand and remember what you read in the Bible?) What's it like to think of these things as a "guarantee" that God will fulfill all of his promises to you?

4 The man who angrily confronted Paul has now had a change of heart. Paul is concerned that this man may be "overwhelmed by excessive sorrow" if the Corinthians don't forgive and restore him. Paul tells them he doesn't want the devil to "outwit us" by creating broken relationships that will hinder their shared work. "We are not unaware of [Satan's] schemes," he says.

➔ Are there broken relationships in your life that are keeping you and others from representing Jesus more effectively? Without denying anyone's personal responsibility, is it possible that the devil has helped create and perpetuate these broken relationships? Can you take an initiative this week to let someone know you're open to pursuing mutual forgiveness and reconciliation?

SPIRITUAL INSIGHTS FROM A TIME OF DANGER AND REJECTION

2 Corinthians > Paul in Troas

INTRODUCTION

Paul next addresses the Corinthians from the perspective of the time when he didn't find Titus in Troas. Paul was hoping to hear that the misunderstanding with the Corinthians was resolved. Instead, he had to keep living in the tension of uncertainty. Was Titus delayed because things in Corinth had gone so badly—were the Corinthians refusing to be reconciled?

As Paul writes, he's actually found Titus in Macedonia and learned that the original problem has been resolved. But he's also learned about a new difficulty: the doubts about him that the "super-apostles" are planting in the Corinthians' minds. And so Paul can relive all of the deep and conflicting emotions he felt as he traveled on from Troas with "no peace of mind," freshly aware of how precarious life is and anguishing over whether his dear children in Corinth had rejected him. This reliving of the experience gives him the opportunity to share the profound insights he received from God in this time of "conflicts on the outside, fears within." Paul doesn't write systematically in this part of his letter, but rather weaves together reflections on a number of themes arising from his experiences.

READING

Have five people read this part of 2 Corinthians. After each reader finishes, have the group work together to summarize the main idea of what Paul has just said. Have the readers begin in these places:

- ★ "Now when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ . . ."
- ★ "Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone . . ."
- ★ "Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry . . ."
- ★ "Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord . . ."
- ★ "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers." (Ending, "in all our troubles my joy knows no bounds.")

DISCUSSION

1 One of the points Paul makes repeatedly in this part of his letter, aware of the doubts that the "super-apostles" are creating about him, is that he doesn't need to "commend" himself to the Corinthians. They know perfectly well of the integrity and effectiveness of his work; in fact, they're living proof of it. "You," he tells them, "are our letter" of recommendation.

- ➡ Give the members of your group some time to reflect on these questions silently: Who are your "living letters of recommendation?" Whose lives have you invested in, so that they now provide living testimony to the integrity of your relationship with them and your positive influence? Silently name three people you'd like to invest in for the future. Conclude this time of

reflection by praying out loud as a group, giving thanks to God for the opportunity to influence lives in this way.

2 Another of Paul's major themes in this part of the letter is the contrast between what's outside and what's inside. He notes that some people (specifically the "super-apostles") "take pride in what is seen," that is, in outward appearances, "rather than in what is in the heart." But as Paul has lived through this challenging and transforming time, he's discovered that God can be at work, in us and through us, in profoundly powerful ways even when we look defeated and abandoned on the outside. "We have this treasure in jars of clay," he explains, "to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us."

➔ Do you know someone who's plain and humble looking on the outside but who's still a powerful channel for God's work? Tell the group a little bit about them and what you've seen God do through them.

➔ What have you learned about God through times when you looked (and may have felt) defeated and abandoned?

3 This passage marks a transition in Paul's letters. To this point, he's been writing to people who've "welcomed the message" about Jesus as he's been proclaiming it. But now the very people he's helped to become followers of Jesus are challenging and questioning his message. All Paul needed to do in 1 Corinthians was explain that leaders like Peter and Apollos really were proclaiming the same message he was. But Paul now needs to defend his understanding of salvation against opposing ideas. He teaches that salvation comes through faith and trust in Jesus. But people like the "super-apostles" teach that even if a person believes in Jesus, they still have to follow the law of Moses (or at least certain key provisions in it). Paul defends his understanding against these opposing ideas briefly here in 2 Corinthians and at much greater length in his next two letters.

In his earlier letters, Paul mentioned in passing *what* Jesus does for us. He told the Thessalonians, for example, that Jesus "died and rose again" for us

and that he "rescues us from the coming wrath." But now, to help his friends stand firm in what they've believed, Paul begins to spell out *how* Jesus' life, death, and resurrection bring us salvation. This concept is so rich in meaning that it needs to be seen from more than one perspective to be fully appreciated. And so Paul explains it in several ways:

- He says that "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ"—restoring a broken relationship.
- He adds that God wasn't "counting people's sins against them." That is, God extended forgiveness.
- Paul also says that God "leads us . . . in Christ's triumphal procession," portraying Jesus' work as a victory over our spiritual enemies.
- And he writes that "if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come." In other words, Jesus delivers us from the conditions of this age and enables us to live under the conditions of the coming age or the "new creation."

All of these explanations capture some vital aspect of what Jesus does for us.

➔ Divide your group into teams and have each team discuss what Paul means by one of these four explanations. Then have them share with the rest of the group, in their own words, what they've understood him to mean.

4 The conflict with the "super-apostles" leads Paul to meditate on the contrast between the fading glory of the old covenant (the law of Moses) and the "surpassing glory" of the new covenant with Jesus. He describes how believers in Jesus can "with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory" and so be "transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory." This, perhaps, is the awful and beautiful place that Paul's desperate experiences have carried him to. (A. W. Tozer writes similarly in *The Pursuit of God*, "When the eyes of the soul looking out meet the eyes of God looking in, heaven has begun right here on this earth.")

➔ What do you think it means to contemplate the Lord's glory and be transformed by it? Have you begun to experience that? If so, talk about your experience.

ORGANIZING THE COLLECTION FOR THE POOR

2 Corinthians > Paul in Macedonia

INTRODUCTION

Paul now addresses the Corinthians from his own real-time perspective. He's caught up with Titus in Macedonia and learned of their "longing" and "ardent concern" for him. He says they've proven, even to themselves, "how devoted to us you are." Case closed. Paul can now move on to describe the practical measures he's taking to help the Corinthians finish their collection for the poor in Judea. He's sending Titus back with two other "brothers" to get them organized before a delegation from Macedonia arrives.

READING

Have someone read Paul's acknowledgment that he and the Corinthians are now reconciled, beginning, "For when we came into Macedonia . . ."

Then have another person read Paul's instructions for the collection, beginning, "And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace . . ." and ending, "Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!"

DISCUSSION

1 Paul gives the Corinthians his assurance that their gifts will safely reach the people they're intended for. They'll be brought personally to Judea by trusted leaders "chosen by the churches" to make sure everything about this collection is done "right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of man."

- ➔ What organizations that help the poor do you have confidence in to distribute your gifts efficiently, honestly, and effectively? What gives you this confidence in them?
- ➔ You're the pastor of a small church, whose finances a kindly older man has always handled without any supervision. But a person who's an accountant has recently joined your church and urged you to have the books audited regularly. When you tell the older man you're going to do this, he looks hurt and asks, "What's the matter, don't you trust me?" What do you tell him in response?

2 While Paul is clearly hoping to help the Corinthians collect a significant amount of money, he describes several other things he believes the collection can accomplish as well. He wants the Corinthians to become like the Macedonians, who gave themselves "first of all to the Lord" and then "also to us," even before they gave any money. He also expects that the recipients of their gifts will offer "many expressions of thanks to God," and that "in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you." In other words, this collection will be an "act of grace" that will result in deeper devotion to God, stronger relationships between believers, and glad expressions of praise and thanks to God in worship.

- ➔ Have you ever had to ask fellow believers to help support you, either short term or longer term, part time or full time, as you've served God? If so, did you see the kinds of things happen that Paul describes here?

➔ If you haven't asked for support, but have supported a specific person or organization when asked, what kind of connection did this create between you, and how did it influence your relationship with God?

3 The Corinthians don't need to worry about where they'll get the money to contribute to the collection. Paul assures them that God will give them each something to give. "You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion," he promises.

➔ Have you ever been part of a group of believers who set out to collect money to help people in Jesus' name? If so, were some able to contribute more than they anticipated because they received an unexpected check, were offered a short-term job, etc.? Tell their stories if you can.

➔ As a small group (or as a larger community, if you're using this guide for a community Bible experience), identify a cause or organization you'd like to support together. Organize a special collection for them. Have each person ask God to "give them something to give" to the collection in such a way that they'll recognize that this gift was God providing through them.

SHOWDOWN WITH THE "SUPER-APOSTLES"

2 Corinthians > Paul in Corinth

INTRODUCTION

In the last part of his letter, Paul addresses the Corinthians from the perspective of his impending arrival in their city. His tone changes to confrontation as he takes on the "super-apostles," answering their challenges and exposing their exploitation and deception of the Corinthians.

What Paul chooses to emphasize about himself reveals something about what the "super-apostles" were teaching. He points out that he's both a national and an ethnic Jew (an "Israelite" and a "Abraham's descendant") and a native speaker of Hebrew. This suggests that the "super-apostles" themselves were trying to capitalize on being authentically Jewish, probably because they were trying to get believers in Jesus to keep at least some provisions of the law. We don't get many details of their teaching, but Paul does say they're "enslaving" the Corinthians. In his later letters, Paul uses this same language to describe people who are promoting law keeping. Paul will increasingly have to battle against this "different gospel" in the years ahead.

READING

Have five different people read this last part of 2 Corinthians. After each reader, the group should summarize what Paul has just said. Have the readers begin in these places:

- ★ "By the humility and gentleness of Christ, I appeal to you . . ."
- ★ "I hope you will put up with me in a little foolishness."
- ★ "Whatever anyone else dares to boast about—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast about."
- ★ "I have made a fool of myself, but you drove me to it."
- ★ "This will be my third visit to you."

Then have someone read the conclusion to the letter, beginning, "Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice!"

DISCUSSION

1 Paul's first challenge is to demonstrate that his credentials are as impressive as those of the "super-apostles." He protests that this is the kind of one-upmanship only a "fool" would engage in. But since the Corinthians are insisting, Paul obliges. He describes his own impeccable religious pedigree and his extensive labors as a "servant of Christ."

- ➔ Without "judging by appearances," as the Corinthians were doing, can we make judgments about what heritage, background, experiences, etc., make a person better able to help us learn what it means to follow Jesus? If so, on what basis? If not, why not?

2 A second objection is that Paul's speaking "amounts to nothing" and that he's "in person he is unimpressive" (literally "weak in body"). Paul admits that he's "untrained as a speaker." But he's not untrained in knowledge—he's educated both in the Hebrew Scriptures and in philosophy. So even if he doesn't speak in the polished rhetoric that the Greeks and Romans so prized, the Corinthians should still value his teaching highly.

A little bit later, after describing an extraordinary vision he had, Paul explains why he's "weak in body." God gave him a "thorn in [his] flesh" to protect him from becoming dangerously proud. Paul describes this "thorn" *symbolically* as a "messenger of Satan." But he doesn't say what it *actually* was, only that it caused bodily "weakness." But, Paul insists, "I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. . . . For when I am weak, then I am strong."

- ➔ Do you have a physical "weakness" that you wish God would take away? If so, given what Paul writes here, could this weakness actually be protecting you from something and permitting God's power to be seen more clearly in you?

3 The "super-apostles," noting that Paul hasn't gotten the Corinthians to pay him, accuse him of being incapable of making a living as an apostle. (They, on the other hand, are taking everything from the Corinthians they can get.)

In response, Paul points out that actually, he does make a living as an apostle: People from Macedonia even brought him support while he was in Corinth. But he never took money from the Corinthians themselves. (Perhaps this was to set a good example of working for a living, as he did for the Thessalonians.) And he's not about to start now, because he knows this is one area where the "super-apostles" will never try to compete with him, revealing that their true motive is to make money.

- ➔ What danger signs should followers of Jesus look for to expose religious-sounding people who are just trying to get money from them? What positive signs do you look for that give you confidence in people you might help support?

4 Even as he answers the super-apostles' accusations, Paul levels a devastating charge against them: they haven't built anything in a "sphere of service" of their own. They're just parasites, living off someone else's labors.

Behind this charge is an implicit philosophy of ministry: God "assigns" each person a "sphere of service" where they're expected to expand the realm of God's direct influence in the world. As a person works faithfully, their "sphere of activity" may expand—this is what Paul says he's hoping for. While people can work together with others, as Paul regularly did, they shouldn't crowd into someone else's sphere and try to take credit for their work, as the "super-apostles" are doing. They are, he concludes, "false apostles," "deceitful workers," and "servants" of Satan, only "masquerading as apostles of Christ."

➡ Paul tells the Corinthians here, "I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy." Is it appropriate for a Christian leader to feel and express this kind of "jealousy"? Explain.

➡ Who do you know who has a recognizable "sphere of service," an area in which they feel called by God to work? (Don't just think of people working with religious organizations. A person might feel called to work in inner-city public schools, for example, or to do research into renewable energy sources.) How far does their work currently extend into the "sphere" you would describe them working in? Once it reaches the limits of that sphere, how might it expand beyond that? Does this person's example help you recognize and understand your own "sphere of service" better? Pray for one another, that God would help you to recognize your assigned spheres and work faithfully within them and to expand them.

OUTLINE OF GALATIANS

The letter's opening (sender's name, recipients, good wish)

(Session 18)

Paul sets the record straight about what he teaches and where he learned it

- *Paul received his gospel by revelation from Jesus Christ*
- *He didn't get it from the apostles; he didn't even meet them for 17 years*
- *When he did talk to the apostles, they added nothing to his gospel*

Paul addresses an anticipated objection:
"Does Christ promote sin?"

GALATIANS

MAIN ARGUMENT OF THE LETTER

(Session 19)

Paul refers to the story of Abraham to show that law keeping doesn't need to be added to faith:

- Abraham was justified by faith long before the law was given

Paul addresses an anticipated objection: "Is the law opposed to the promises?"

Paul makes a personal appeal to the Galatians based on their relationship

(Session 20)

Paul refers again to the story of Abraham to show that law keeping doesn't need to be added to faith:

- Abraham has two kinds of descendants, physical and spiritual; only the spiritual ones receive the blessing.

Paul makes another personal appeal to the Galatians based on their relationship

(Session 21)

Paul explains that being guided by the Spirit enables people to live as God intends without the bondage of being under the law

Paul gives practical instructions to the Galatians

The letter's conclusion (in Paul's own handwriting)

EXPERIENCING GALATIANS AS A WHOLE

INTRODUCTION

After writing 2 Corinthians, Paul continued on to Corinth. While he was in that city, he received a report that people like the “super-apostles” were infiltrating some of the other communities he’d founded. These communities were in the Roman province of Galatia, in central Asia Minor, where he’d gone on each of his three journeys. (See the maps on pages 8 and 25. Note that the province of Galatia extended south nearly to the Mediterranean coast.) Paul wrote an urgent letter to these “churches in Galatia,” saying how astonished he was that they were turning to a “different gospel.”

In this letter, known as Galatians, Paul refutes the idea that beyond believing in Jesus a person needs to follow certain provisions of the law of Moses in order to be saved (such as being circumcised, keeping kosher, and observing the Sabbath and annual Jewish festivals). His letters to the Corinthians largely discussed practical matters in the life of their community, but now as Paul writes to the Galatians, the encroachment of rival teachers provokes him to discuss the story of God in the Scriptures at greater length. As a result, a more developed explanation of his understanding of how God saves us through faith in Jesus has been preserved for later generations.

Many interpreters believe that Galatians was actually written at an earlier time in Paul’s life, after his first journey to Cyprus and Asia Minor (see session 1), but before his second and third journeys. However, certain details in Galatians arguably correspond best with a time shortly after Paul wrote 2 Corinthians:

- The language and themes of Galatians are so close to those of Romans that it’s likely these two letters were written around the same time, and Paul explains in Romans that he’s on his way to Jerusalem with “a contribution for the poor” that “Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make.”
- Paul writes in Galatians that the apostles in Jerusalem asked him to “remember the poor,” and that he was “eager” to do this. It’s unlikely he would bring this up years before he’d actually done anything about it, but it makes sense for him to mention it in the middle of the collection.
- Paul’s language of being “eager” is identical to his reference in 2 Corinthians to the “earnestness” [“eagerness”] of the Macedonians in their giving.
- Paul’s encouragement to “do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers” may similarly refer to the collection. (The Galatians were taking a collection of their own at this time.)

The scholarly conversation about when Paul wrote this letter continues. But this study guide will follow the interpretation that it was written in Corinth, when Paul was preparing to travel to Jerusalem with the collection.

READING

Read Galatians out loud together as a group. This should take about half an hour. It’s right after 2 Corinthians, on pages 1551–56, in *The Books of The Bible*. (If you’re using another edition of the Scriptures, you’ll also find Galatians right after 2 Corinthians, since it’s the next longest of Paul’s letters.)

Take turns reading out loud. Change readers whenever you come to what feels like a natural break. Note any words or phrases you don't understand and discuss them afterwards.

As you read, you can follow the outline of Galatians on page 82. Notice how it's written in the form of a letter but it doesn't have the customary opening thanksgiving. (Paul is upset and gets right to the point!)

DISCUSSION

- ➔ Which of the things that Paul says in Galatians struck you the most? Why?
- ➔ How is Galatians similar to, and different from, the other four of Paul's letters that you've read and discussed?
- ➔ You take a friend who's a follower of Jesus to a familiar restaurant and suggest she'd like the pork ribs. "Every animal that does not have a divided hoof or that does not chew the cud is unclean for you," she replies and orders something else. Quoting the Hebrew Bible for something like this seems a little weird to you, but you don't think too much of it until you realize that she's started wearing only dresses. You ask her about this, and she replies, "A woman must not wear men's clothing, for the LORD God detests anyone who does this." "I don't wear jewelry anymore, either," she adds, "because the Bible says, 'your beauty should not come from outward adornment, like the wearing of gold jewelry.'" "At least that's what our new neighbors are teaching us," she adds, "but I'm open to talking about it." How would you appeal to the overall argument of the book of Galatians to help this friend understand the freedom she has?

PAUL'S GOSPEL: RECEIVED BY REVELATION, CONFIRMED BY THE APOSTLES

Galatians > Prelude to Main Argument

INTRODUCTION

Before beginning his main argument in Galatians, Paul responds to some accusations that have been made against him. The people who are teaching a "different gospel," the "agitators," are saying that everywhere else Paul teaches that followers of Jesus have to keep certain provisions of the law. They claim that this is what the apostles in Jerusalem teach and that Paul learned it from them; he only told the Galatians something different to get on their good side by making things easy for them.

To set the record straight, Paul lays out the facts of how he received the gospel he preaches and what interactions he's had with the apostles in Jerusalem.

READING

Have someone read the letter-like opening of Galatians.

Have three other people read Paul's response to the accusations against him, beginning at these places:

★ “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you . . .”

★ “I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel I preached is not of human origin.”

★ “When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned.” (End with, “If righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!”)

DISCUSSION

1 Paul makes clear that the apostles in Jerusalem didn’t teach him the gospel he’s been preaching. He didn’t even meet any of them for many years, except for Peter and James on one brief visit to Jerusalem. Rather, he received his gospel “by revelation from Jesus Christ.” However, when he needed to be sure “I . . . had not been running my race in vain,” he went to Jerusalem and privately consulted with “those esteemed as leaders.” “They added nothing to my message,” he insists—no requirement that believers in Jesus keep certain provisions of the law. Circumcision did come up, but only because some “false believers . . . infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have.” But the apostles didn’t insist that even Titus, a Gentile with a prominent role in Paul’s ministry, be circumcised. Rather, he says, they “gave me . . . the right hand of fellowship,” their welcome as full partners.

As for the claim that Paul relaxed the requirements for following Jesus to get on the Galatians’ good side, he observes that if he really was a people-pleaser, it would be much easier for him to agree that law keeping needs to be added to faith, instead of fighting so hard against this idea.

➞ Estimate what percentage of the things you believe about Jesus comes from each of these sources:

- What other people have taught you
- What you’ve read in the Bible
- What you’ve experienced in your relationship with God

Describe the dangers of relying on any one of these sources alone.

2 While the leaders in Jerusalem agreed that non-Jews could be followers of Jesus without keeping the law, they had different understandings about what this implied. James apparently believed that Jews should still observe a ceremonial separation from Gentiles and not eat with them.

After Paul met with the leaders in Jerusalem, Peter visited Antioch, Paul’s home base. At first Peter ate with Gentiles, but when “certain men came from James,” he drew back. “The other Jews” followed Peter’s example, so that Paul had to “oppose him” (literally “take a stand against him”) “to his face.”

Paul insisted to Peter that their own experience growing up as Jews showed that they couldn’t follow the law consistently and sincerely enough to be “justified” that way. So why would anyone think that Gentiles, who didn’t know the law and weren’t used to following it, could somehow be justified through it? Everyone, both Jew and Gentile, needs to be justified “by faith in Jesus Christ.”

(The related ideas of being “justified” and having “faith” are two of the richest and most complex concepts in Paul’s writings. **Being justified by faith is the major theme of both Galatians and Romans.** Paul mentions this concept in passing in his earlier letters. For example, he told the Corinthians, “you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.” But he develops it extensively in these letters. It will be explored in greater detail in the next session.)

➞ Even if Jews and Gentiles both need to believe in Jesus, can they maintain separate cultural and religious identities? Do you know any people of Jewish heritage who are followers of Jesus? Do they see themselves as Christians rather than Jews now, or do they see following Jesus as a way of being Jewish? If a Jewish friend asked you if they could follow Jesus but still maintain a Jewish religious and cultural identity, rather than adopt a Christian one, what would you tell them? What would you tell a Muslim friend who asked the same thing? (There are some observations about this question you can interact with at the end of this session.)

3 Once Paul has set the record straight about himself, he steps back to anticipate an objection someone might raise to his assertions. (We’ll

see him do this repeatedly in Galatians and Romans.) The objection is, “If everyone is relying only on faith in Christ, then you’re removing the restraint of the law. What if this prompts them to do wrong things? Doesn’t that mean that Christ promotes sin?” Paul responds, “Absolutely not!” He explains that when someone becomes a follower of Jesus, he lives in them, and they live by faith in him, so that Jesus becomes the new source of their inner life. And Jesus won’t ever lead them into sin.

➔ Choose an “investigative journalist” and have them find someone in the group who believes they’ve experienced the reality Paul describes here: “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God.” Have this journalist interview this person in front of the others to ask about this experience. (The group can do a number of interviews with different members, by more than one journalist, if it would like.)

NOTE

Observations in response to the discussion point in section 2: There is no one single “Christian” *cultural* identity. A wide variety of cultural practices have been embraced by followers of Jesus around the world, and people who become his followers can usually continue most (but not always all) of their cultural activities. The question of *religious* identity is more complicated. Many genuine followers of Jesus in the first century (and later centuries) identified themselves as Jews and worshipped in the synagogues. Could people today consider themselves Muslims, worship in mosques, and still be genuine followers of Jesus? From what he writes in 1 Corinthians about becoming “all things to all people,” Paul would probably go a long way towards accommodating people in a situation like this. But there does come a point where a person needs to draw a line in terms of religious identity. When the Corinthians went to the local temples and celebrated meals in honor of pagan gods, that was going too far.

ABRAHAM: JUSTIFIED BY FAITH CENTURIES BEFORE THE LAW WAS GIVEN

Galatians > Main Argument > First Appeal to Abraham’s Story

INTRODUCTION

Paul now begins the main argument of his letter. He wants to show from the Scriptures that people who have faith in Jesus don’t also need to keep certain provisions of the law of Moses in order to be “justified.”

In Galatians and Romans, the words “just,” “justify,” “justification,” “righteous,” and “righteousness” all translate the same Greek root (*dikai-*) and express the same basic meaning. They describe a person fulfilling their relational responsibilities to someone else. A husband, for example, promises to be faithful to his wife, provide for her, protect her, and cherish her, and when he does, he’s “righteous” or “just” (*dikaïos*) in relationship to her.

When used in a legal sense, this cluster of words refers to someone fulfilling their responsibilities to the state and society. They aren’t breaking the law, they’re paying their taxes, they’re contributing positively to the community, etc. In this sense the terms can be translated “innocent” or “good.” Paul sometimes uses the terms in legal analogies like this, so that “to justify” would mean “to declare innocent.”

An even more important usage for him, however, is to describe a person fulfilling their relational responsibilities towards God. These responsibilities include doing what God has said is proper and beneficial, and not doing what God has said is improper and destructive. *However*—and this is the key to everything Paul argues—this kind of “doing,” when it is truly just/righteous (*dikaios*), actually expresses the fulfillment of a more fundamental responsibility towards God, which is to *trust* God, based on a conviction that God is trustworthy. This trust means:

1. believing that God will keep his promises
2. accepting that God’s designation of things as proper or improper:
 - is accurate and impartial
 - is better than our own understanding of these things
 - doesn’t arise from a hidden agenda that conflicts with our best interests

This *trust* is what Paul describes as *faith* or *believing*. (These three words also translate a single Greek root, *pist-*.)

In Galatians and Romans, Paul warns urgently against the danger of trying to be *dikaios* towards God through “doing,” in and of itself, such as by following various provisions of the law of Moses. One reason this doesn’t work is that it’s impossible for anyone to follow the law consistently and sincerely enough to fulfill all of their responsibilities towards God in this way. But the more important reason why this doesn’t make a person *dikaios* is that it ignores the most fundamental responsibility a person has towards God, which is to *trust*. Trying our best to follow the law on our own substitutes self-assertion for a trusting reliance on a trustworthy God.

READING

Take turns reading a paragraph each through the next section of Paul’s letter, beginning, “You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?” and ending, “I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you.”

DISCUSSION

1 Paul first appeals to the Galatians’ own experience to show why “observing the law” doesn’t have to be added to “believing.” God gave them the Holy Spirit and “worked miracles among them” as soon as they “believed what they heard” about Jesus—long before they ever considered following Jewish religious observances.

- ➔ What has your experience of the Holy Spirit been? Is it sufficient to convince you that no particular cultural practices have to be added to what you’ve believed about Jesus?
- ➔ Do you know anything about followers of Jesus whose cultural practices are very different from yours? If so, how does their way of living as Jesus’ followers (their way of worship, for example) differ from yours?

2 Paul next argues that Abraham, the ancestor of the Jews, was declared to be righteous when he *believed* (*trusted* in, had *faith* in) God. This was 430 years before the law was given to Moses. God promised Abraham that “all nations,” meaning Gentiles like the Galatians, would be blessed through him. The implication is that “those who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.” The Galatians don’t need to rely on the law to be justified.

Paul says that just as a human will can’t be changed by anyone else once a person has signed it, so a covenant (agreement) that God makes can’t be set aside by something that comes along later. So even the giving of the law to Moses doesn’t change God’s promise to Abraham that believing people of “all nations” will be blessed through him.

- ➔ Paul assumes a knowledge of Abraham’s story as background to much of what he writes in Galatians and Romans. Work together as a group to summarize this story, based on what you know about it from other reading and studying. If someone in your group has

a laptop, they can record everyone's contributions and read the summary back when it's finished. If you feel you might be missing some important parts of the story, you can read about Abraham in the book of Genesis (pages 19–34 in *The Books of The Bible*) before your next session and add more information then.

3 Again Paul steps back from his own argument to address an anticipated objection: “Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God?” “Absolutely not!” The law shouldn't be seen as something that inherently leads people to rely on the wrong means to be “justified.” Instead, Paul explains, the law was intended as a guardian, to teach and restrain humanity in its spiritual immaturity. He uses the analogy of people being “subject to guardians and trustees” while they are underage, and “no different from [slaves].” In this analogy, when anyone believes in Jesus, God sends the “Spirit of his Son” into their hearts, so that they “come of age,” and like responsible adult children, they naturally do what pleases and honors their Father.

➤ Have you been experiencing a change in your own motivation for obeying God, from trying to avoid punishment to expressing your loyalty and commitment to God's purposes in the world? If so, describe one area of life where this change is taking place.

4 Paul gives several more illustrations here of *how* Jesus' life, death, and resurrection bring us salvation. As we saw in session 14, this concept is so rich in meaning that it needs to be seen from more than one perspective.

- “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.” That is, Jesus *substituted* himself for us as the one under God's curse for breaking the law.
- Jesus *redeemed* us. That is, he paid a price to buy us out of slavery, because we were “enslaved” to things that “by nature are not gods.”
- Through Jesus we have received *adoption*. God bought us from others who held us as slaves, but he didn't bring us into his household to be his own slaves. Instead, he made us his sons and daughters.

➤ Divide your group into teams and have them express in their own words what Paul means by these further illustrations of what Jesus has done for us. If we understand Jesus' work in these ways, what are the implications for our relationship with God?

IT'S ABRAHAM'S SPIRITUAL CHILDREN WHO ARE JUSTIFIED

Galatians > Main Argument > Second Appeal to Abraham's Story

Before beginning this session, update your summary of Abraham's story by incorporating any additional details group members have to contribute.

INTRODUCTION

Paul now makes another reference to Abraham's story to show that followers of Jesus don't need to keep certain provisions of the law. Specifically, they don't need to be circumcised, as the "agitators" are claiming. (If you need a reminder of what circumcision is, see the note at the end of session 4.)

Before and after Paul appeals again to the story of Abraham, he pleads directly with the Galatians, on the basis of their relationship, not to follow the "agitators."

READING

Have someone read Paul's first plea to the Galatians, beginning, "I plead with you, brothers and sisters, become like me, for I became like you."

Then have someone read Paul's further discussion of the story of Abraham, beginning, "Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says?"

Finally, have another person read Paul's second plea, beginning, "You were running a good race. Who cut in on you . . .?" and ending, "I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!"

DISCUSSION

1 Paul bursts out with a question that's probably been tormenting him: After all they've shared together, how could the Galatians follow teachers who are criticizing and contradicting him? Paul reminds them that they took care of him when he had an "illness" (literally "weakness of the flesh"). This may be the same "weakness" he describes in 2 Corinthians, since he says the Galatians didn't treat him with "contempt or scorn" because of it, unlike those in Corinth who were trying to discredit him because he was "weak in body." (We don't know exactly what the illness was, but it seems to have affected his eyes.) Paul assures the Galatians that they "did [him] no wrong." This expression uses another form of the root that's translated "just" or "righteous." It means that the Galatians have always fulfilled their relational responsibilities to Paul: to this point, they've been loyal and supportive, as his "dear children."

➤ Recall the people you said in session 1 were like spiritual "mothers" or "fathers" to you. Under what circumstances did you meet them? Have you ever had the opportunity to help take care of them? If you described some people as being like your spiritual "children," have they taken care of you? If so, tell the group how.

2 Paul makes a further appeal to the story of Abraham, but explains that he's doing so "figuratively," using its characters and events to represent spiritual realities. Abraham had two sons, but only one "shared in the inheritance." This was Isaac, the son born in freedom, who symbolizes being justified by faith. Ishmael, the other son, was born into slavery, and represents "trying to be justified by the law." Paul warns the Galatians that if they move

from faith to law keeping as the basis for justification, they'll be exchanging freedom for slavery, and they'll be "obligated to obey the whole law."

➔ Why does moving in part to the principle of law keeping eventually crowd out the principle of faith and trust entirely? (It may be helpful to review the last two paragraphs of the introduction to session 19.)

➔ In 1 Corinthians, Paul wrote, "Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts." But here he says, "In Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love." Why does he use different language here? (There are some observations about this at the end of this session that you can interact with after you've shared your own ideas.)

3 Paul ends his second plea to the Galatians with an unforgettable line, saying he wishes the agitators would "emasculate themselves!" This is the same kind of challenge he issued to the Corinthians: "If you really don't want women to have anything on their heads, then shave them!" The argument here would be, "If you really think that cutting off parts of your body will help you obey God better, I can think of a way for you to really stay out of trouble . . ."

➔ This is the Bible, and Paul is an apostle called by Jesus, but he tells some people he wishes they'd go castrate themselves. Did God inspire him to say this? Explain.

NOTE

Observations in response to discussion point 2 in section 2: Paul may use different language so he won't be misunderstood. If he told the Galatians that "keeping God's commands is what counts," they might think he wanted them

to be justified by keeping the law. So here he stresses faith and love as the essential sources of action for followers of Jesus. But Paul didn't want the Corinthians to practice law keeping either; he meant that *whether you are a Jew or a Gentile*, what matters is that your faith leads you to keep God's commands. Faith expressing itself through love and faith expressing itself through obeying God—these are ultimately the same, as we'll see in the next session.

THE DEEDS OF THIS AGE AND THE FRUIT OF THE COMING AGE

Galatians > Main Argument > A Final Concern
Galatians > Practical Instructions and Conclusion

INTRODUCTION

As Paul wraps up his case for justification by faith, he returns to address the concern he anticipated earlier: if people are no longer restrained by the law, what's to keep them from running wild?

After answering this question, Paul gives the Galatians some brief practical instructions. They deal with the kind of matters he discusses in 1 and 2 Corinthians, such as the restoration of those who've been "caught in a sin," compensation for those who teach "the word," and probably the collection for the poor.

Paul concludes with a summary of his arguments, written in his own hand to authenticate the letter.

READING

Have someone read Paul's comments about not being restrained by the law, beginning, "You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free."

Then have another person read Paul's practical instructions, beginning, "Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently."

Finally, have someone read Paul's conclusion, beginning, "See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand!"

DISCUSSION

1 To explain how people who aren't governed by the law can still live as God intends, Paul uses the Greek term *sarx* ("flesh") in a specialized sense, to refer the characteristic patterns of this "present evil age." (The NIV often translates *sarx* as "sinful nature" when Paul uses it in this sense.) We've seen Paul use the term this way earlier: in 2 Corinthians he writes, "we regard no one *from a worldly point of view*" and that he doesn't "live *by the standards of this world*" (in both cases, "according to *sarx*").

Here in Galatians, Paul uses the term to reframe the problem he's been addressing. All the behaviors the agitators want to control through law keeping are actually evidence that people are still living "according to *sarx*," that is, in the way characteristic of this "present evil age." Paul says that those who commit the "acts of the flesh [*sarx*] . . . will not inherit the kingdom of God." He means that these acts aren't characteristic of those who *will* inherit the kingdom of God and are already experiencing its realities. The law can't help people overcome these behaviors because it can't take them out of this age. The law itself belongs to this age. The true question isn't whether a person is depending on faith or law; it's whether they're living in this age or the next.

When a person trusts in Jesus, this makes them part of the coming age. Paul says at the beginning of Galatians that Jesus "gave himself for our sins to rescue us from [take us out of] the present evil age." However, believers won't automatically follow the characteristic pattern of the coming age. Paul explains that the two ways of life "are in conflict with each other," and that believers are living in the crossfire, "so . . . you are not to do whatever you want." Paul doesn't want the Galatians to misunderstand the way the Corinthians did and think that because they're "spiritual," they "have the

right to do anything.” Instead, they must depend on the Spirit to guide them into the way of life characteristic of the coming age they’re already a part of.

As we’ve seen, Paul considers the Spirit a “down payment” on everything believers will receive and experience when the coming age fully arrives. As the advance agent of that age, the Spirit can show them how to live according to its patterns. When they do, taking on the character qualities that Paul calls the “fruit of the Spirit,” they’ll also truly fulfill the law, because “the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

➔ Have you ever experienced the Holy Spirit leading and empowering you to have the right attitude towards a person or situation or to exhibit a character quality that didn’t come to you naturally? If so, share your experience with the group.

➔ Which of the “fruit of the Spirit” that Paul describes here would you most like to have more of in your life right now? Explain why.

2 In his conclusion, Paul summarizes his argument that law keeping doesn’t need to be added to faith in Jesus. He also reprises the idea of being taken out of this “present evil age,” saying that through the “cross of our Lord Jesus Christ,” the “world” (*kosmos*, here a synonym for the present age) has been crucified to him, and he to it—they’re both dead, as far as the other is concerned.

➔ In Paul’s letters and other biblical writings, the term *kosmos* or “world” can refer to:

- the world we live on (planet Earth)
- the population of the world
- human culture and society
- the “present evil age”

In which of these senses of the term *kosmos* should followers of Jesus be “dead to the world,” and in which should they be “alive to the world”?

➔ Paul now says, “Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is the new creation.” Why does he

rephrase himself once again? (There are some observations you can interact with at the end of this session.)

NOTE

Observations in response to discussion point 2 in section 2: In this part of Galatians, Paul is stressing that faith in Jesus takes us out of “this present evil age” and places us in the coming age. So in this context, when he says that what matters is not being circumcised, but having faith in Jesus, he expresses this in terms of becoming part of “the new creation” or the coming age.

ROMANS

The letter's opening (sender's name, recipients, good wish, thanksgiving)

MAIN ARGUMENT OF THE LETTER: BOTH JEW AND GENTILE MUST BE JUSTIFIED BY FAITH

(Session 23) FIRST PHASE: Neither Jew nor Gentile can follow their own means of knowing God's intentions	(Session 25) SECOND PHASE: Appeals to the Scriptures	(Session 27) THIRD PHASE: Why the Jews haven't been responding to the gospel, while the Gentiles have
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Gentiles haven't followed physics (Session 24) <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Jews haven't followed the law	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The story of Abraham shows he was justified by faith• The story of Adam shows how "one righteous act" can bring "justification and life for all" (Session 26)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Only a "remnant" of the Jews has always followed God• "Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in."
Paul steps back to address anticipated objections	Paul steps back to address anticipated objections	Paul steps back to address anticipated objections

OUTLINE OF ROMANS

(Session 28)

Paul gives practical instructions to the Romans

The letter's conclusion (Paul's travel plans, greetings)

EXPERIENCING ROMANS AS A WHOLE

INTRODUCTION

In 2 Corinthians Paul says that God gives each person a “sphere of service.” He tells the Corinthians that his own sphere already reaches as far as them, and that he hopes it will expand so he can “preach the gospel in the regions beyond you.” When Paul came to Corinth to organize the collection and help bring it to Jerusalem, he began planning another journey, all the way to Spain at the farthest western reaches of the empire, to form more communities of Jesus’ followers.

Paul knew there was already a strong community of believers in Rome, the capital of the empire. He wanted to use that community as a base of operations for his western trip. He wrote to them, in the letter we know as Romans, to explain what he had in mind:

From Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum [the province west of Achaia], I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ. It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else’s foundation. . . . Now that there is no more place for me to work in these regions, and since I have been longing for many years to visit you, I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to see you while passing through and to have you assist me on my journey there.

However, the community of believers in Rome would probably have some hesitations about supporting Paul. Its focus was on bringing the good news about Jesus to Jews. (From what Paul writes to them, it appears their motto was, “First to the Jew.”) But Paul was well known as a messenger to the Gentiles. So he had to persuade this community that they should support his work, even though his focus appeared to be different from theirs.

In addition, the Romans would be wary of Paul because misrepresentations of his message had reached them. Paul had to explain to the Galatians that being “justified by faith in Christ” doesn’t mean that “Christ promotes sin.” Similar misunderstandings of his teaching had spread all the way to Rome. Paul told the Romans he was aware that “some slanderously claim that we say . . . ‘Let us do evil that good may result.’” He needed to correct these misunderstandings in order to receive their support. This led him to offer a longer and even more systematic explanation of how people are “justified by faith” than he did in Galatians.

A woman named Phoebe, a leader of the community of Jesus’ followers in Cencreae (a small city near Corinth), was planning to travel to Rome. This gave Paul the opportunity to send a letter with her refuting the misrepresentations of his teaching and explaining why the Romans should support his western mission. In keeping with the custom of the time, Phoebe would read this letter to the gathered community as Paul’s representative and answer any questions they might have about it.

READING

Read Romans out loud together as a group. This should take about an hour. It’s right after Galatians, on pages 1559–76, in *The Books of The Bible*. (If you’re using another edition of the Scriptures, you can find Romans in the Table of Contents. You’ll see that it’s placed first among Paul’s letters because it’s the longest.)

Take turns reading out loud. Change readers whenever you come to what feels like a natural break. Note any words or phrases you don’t understand and discuss them afterwards. Whenever you come across words like *righteous*, *righteousness*, *justify*, *justification*, etc., remember that, as in Galatians, they refer to a person fulfilling their essential relational responsibility to trust and

obey God. Also remember that *believing* and having *faith* are translations of the same Greek root, which describes deep trust and confidence.

As you read, you can follow the outline of the book on page 104. Note that Romans is written in the form of a letter, and that it does include the customary opening thanksgiving that Paul left out in his letter to the Galatians.

DISCUSSION

- ➔ If you've read all or part of Romans before but never all at once in a group, how was the experience of reading and hearing it this way different? Do you feel you now understand the book better, or differently, than you did before?
- ➔ As you read through the book, did you come across statements that you'd heard before in isolation but now recognized where they fit within its overall argument? If so, tell where.
- ➔ Imagine a conversation between two of Jesus' followers in Rome who arrive at one of their community gatherings and learn that a woman named Phoebe is going to read a letter from Paul. The rumor is that he's asking for support. What do you think these two might say to each other before, and then after, the letter is read?
- ➔ Look at the list of people Paul sends greetings to and from at the end of Romans. What does this list reveal about conditions in the early communities of Jesus' followers and about how Paul carried on his work? (For example, where did churches meet? What kinds of people belonged to them? What kinds of people helped Paul and in what ways?)

GENTILES DON'T FOLLOW *PHYSIS* AND NEED TO BE JUSTIFIED BY FAITH

Romans > Main Argument > First Phase

INTRODUCTION

Paul wants the community of Jesus' followers in Rome to support his planned journey to Spain. But they believe they're supposed to bring the good news about Jesus "first to the Jew," while Paul has a special mission to "call all the Gentiles to . . . faith." So he needs to explain why the Romans should support him.

The Romans likely believe that because God entrusted the Jews with the law, they're spiritually privileged, and this gives them a greater right to the gospel than other nations. To defend bringing the gospel to Jews and Gentiles equally, Paul begins the main body of his letter by investigating not who has a greater *right* to the gospel but who has a greater *need* for it. He demonstrates that "Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin." So even if the gospel is preached "first to the Jew," it must go "then to the Gentile."

Paul shows that each group has some means of knowing what God expects. For Jews, it's the law; for Gentiles, it's *physis*, meaning "nature" or "conscience." But neither group has fulfilled what it knows of God's expectations. As a result, both must be concerned that they'll experience the "wrath of God"—divine punishment—on the coming "day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed."

As we'll see in the next session, Paul is ultimately going to argue that since people can't follow either law or conscience to be "justified," what both Jews and Gentiles need is the "righteousness . . . given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe." But in the passage we'll look at in this session, Paul first works to show that the Gentiles haven't followed *physis*, and so have done many different things that bring them under the threat of God's future wrath.

READING AND DISCUSSION

1 Have someone read the opening of the letter, which names the sender and the recipients and offers a good wish.

Have another person read Paul's description of what he's thankful for about the Romans. Begin, "First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you," and end, "The righteous will live by faith."

➤ Paul typically uses the thanksgivings in his letters to introduce his main themes. Look at 1 and 2 Thessalonians and 1 and 2 Corinthians. How do their thanksgivings introduce their themes? What do Paul's self-description and the thanksgiving in Romans reveal about its theme?

2 Have someone read the start of Paul's argument that Jew and Gentile have an equal need for the gospel. Begin, "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of human beings," and end, "they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them."

Paul's words in this opening section of Romans are another very controversial passage in his letters, because they address the subject of homosexuality. These words have been misunderstood and misapplied to support claims such as "God hates homosexuals," or "Homosexuality is the worst of all sins." Paul isn't saying anything like this, even though what he is saying does rest on an understanding that the practice of homosexuality isn't in keeping with God's intentions.

Paul is describing the Roman Empire's culture and society *in general*, noting the society's failure to acknowledge the true God, its idolatry, and its acceptance of a practice that is "contrary to *physis*" (translated "unnatural" in the NIV). He's not saying that a same-sex attraction in any given *individual* begins with atheism and progresses through the worship of idols.

Paul also isn't singling out homosexuality as the worst of all sins. He's using it to illustrate the concept of not following *physis*. This illustration introduces a long catalogue of things that all show that the Gentiles "do what ought not to be done."

And Paul isn't saying that God hates homosexuals. When he speaks of the "wrath of God" at the beginning of this section, he's not describing *feelings* of anger or hatred on God's part toward any particular group of people. He's referring to the impending future consequences of the Gentiles' general fault of not acknowledging God.

The basic point Paul wants to make is that the Gentiles haven't followed *physis* (nature or conscience). Paul uses homosexual relations as an illustration of this that his readers would recognize. (Among the Greeks and Romans homosexuality was practiced in various contexts. Paul noted to the Corinthians, as we've seen, that some in their community were once practicing homosexuals.) The community of believers in Rome was made up largely of Jews, Gentile converts to Judaism, and "God-fearers," meaning Gentiles who attended the synagogue. So they were familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures and would have shared Paul's understanding that homosexuality was "contrary to *physis*." This enables him to use it as a recognizable illustration as he works toward his larger point, that both Jews and Gentiles have an equal need for the gospel.

➤ Give each person in the group the chance to share what they're thinking and feeling after reading this section of Paul's letter and hearing this explanation of it. (Anyone can "pass" if they want to.) Does anyone feel they now have a better understanding of what Paul does, and doesn't, say about homosexuality? What further questions or concerns does this raise for people? If there are disagreements within your group, what things can you identify that everyone can agree on?

➡ If you believe that as a follower of Jesus you should be guided by the Bible's teaching, and that the Bible describes homosexuality as not in keeping with God's intentions, how can you relate positively, constructively, honestly, lovingly, and respectfully to people who are homosexuals, as well as to people who consider your religion a threat to human rights when it comes to this issue? Share any experiences you've had that suggest good ways of communicating and relating.

JEWS DON'T KEEP THE LAW AND NEED TO BE JUSTIFIED BY FAITH

Romans > Main Argument > First Phase, continued

INTRODUCTION

Paul has argued that even though the Gentiles have *physis* (nature or conscience) to guide them, they haven't followed it. He next argues that in the law the Jews have a much clearer indication of how God wants them to live. But they haven't followed this, either. It's not enough to pride yourself on *having* or *knowing* the Law, Paul insists; you have to *keep* it. If you don't (and no one can do this perfectly enough to be "justified"), "you have become as though you had not been circumcised"—you're just like the Gentiles.

Paul then takes a step back from his own argument to address some anticipated objections (as he did a couple of times in Galatians). As he continues working toward a solution to the problem that "Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin," he corrects four potential misunderstandings of his message. He refutes those who "slandorously claim" that he actually teaches things like these. He explains how his message should be understood correctly, and in the process, he draws his argument forward to its climactic conclusion: The "righteousness of God" is "given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile."

The smaller implication of this conclusion is that the community in Rome should be comfortable supporting Paul's work. The much larger implication

is that God's forgiveness and acceptance are available to anyone, from any background, who puts their faith and trust in Jesus. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."

READING

Romans is the longest and most complex of Paul's letters. In this session and the following ones, you'll be reading longer selections as you move farther into its main argument. These sessions are designed to follow the natural divisions in the letter, but since it's a long letter, these divisions are also long. Be sure to pause after each part of the reading to let people ask about words and concepts that aren't clear, and to help everyone follow what Paul is saying. You may wish to devote more than one group meeting to some of these sessions, in order to have a full discussion. Even so, don't worry if you don't understand every single detail. The goal in this study guide is to get the "big picture" of Paul's letters and understand their overall meaning. Work together toward that goal.

Have someone read Paul's description of how the Jews haven't kept the law, beginning, "You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else."

Then have four people read Paul's correction of misunderstandings of his teaching, beginning at these places:

- ★ "What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew . . . ?"
- ★ "But if our unrighteousness brings out God's righteousness more clearly . . ."
- ★ "What shall we conclude then? Do we have any advantage?"

- ★ "Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded." (Ending, "Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law.")

DISCUSSION

1 Paul warns his fellow Jews that they can't be justified by observing their religion in selective and inconsistent ways. If a person has truly embraced the faith that "the Law and the Prophets" testify to, they should be able to follow it comprehensively. If they can't, or don't, they've misunderstood the purpose of the law within this faith. "No one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law," Paul explains.

- ➔ What Paul says to his fellow Jews here is like a contemporary follower of Islam saying, "If you call yourself a Muslim, but eat pork, drink liquor, and don't pray five times a day, you're really not a Muslim at all." If you're a follower of Jesus, how would you fill in this blank? "If you call yourself a Christian, but _____, you're really not a Christian at all."

2 Paul writes that those who don't have the law may "do by nature [*physis*] things required by the law" and "show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts." These people's thoughts may "defend" them as righteous on the day when God "judges people's secrets" and the thinking and motives behind everyone's actions becomes clear.

- ➔ Based on what Paul writes here, how do you think God will decide the destinies of people who never get to hear about Jesus during their lifetimes on earth?

3 As Paul reaches the culmination of his argument and explains how God justifies "freely by his grace" everyone who believes, he offers several more illustrations to show what Jesus has done for us:

- "Redemption," or freedom from slavery, "came by Christ Jesus."
- Jesus' shed blood was a "sacrifice of atonement," literally a

“propitiation,” an act or gift that made God favorably disposed towards us.

- God showed “forbearance” (pardon or clemency) when he left “sins committed beforehand unpunished.”

➔ Once again divide your group into teams and have each team express in its own words what these illustrations mean. Have each group think of a real-life situation that helps dramatize the illustration.

➔ Of all the illustrations Paul uses (besides these, see session 14, section 3 and session 19, section 4), which helps you understand most meaningfully what Jesus has done for you?

➔ Before you began this study of Paul’s letters, where would you have put yourself on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is not believing in Jesus, 5 is the threshold of believing, and 10 is a settled, unreserved faith and trust in Jesus for life? Where would you put yourself now? If you’ve “stepped across the threshold,” or if you want to know more about how you can do that, share this with the group and ask them to talk and pray with you about it.

THE STORIES OF ABRAHAM AND ADAM ILLUSTRATE JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

Romans > Main Argument > Second Phase

INTRODUCTION

Paul has made one case for why the Romans should support him as Jesus’ messenger to both Jews and Gentiles: both groups have an equal need to hear about Jesus. Paul now makes a further case for the Romans’ support by appealing to the story of Abraham, as he did when he wrote to the Galatians.

He concludes again from this story that we are “justified through faith,” and he describes some of the things this “justification” does for us.

He then appeals to another figure in the Hebrew Scriptures, Adam, to expand on the meaning and implications of justification. He draws a series of contrasts between the effects of what Adam did and the effects of what Jesus did to show how “one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all.” (In 1 Corinthians, Paul draws a similar comparison, calling Jesus the “last Adam.”)

READING

Have someone read Paul’s appeal to the story of Abraham, beginning, “What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, discovered . . . ?”

Then have another person read Paul's description of the effects of justification, beginning, "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith . . ."

Finally, have someone read the contrasts Paul draws between Adam and Jesus, beginning, "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man . . ." and ending, "so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."

DISCUSSION

1 There are a couple of important differences between the way Paul appeals to Abraham's story here in Romans and the appeals he makes in Galatians.

First, the purpose of the appeal is different. In Galatians, Paul was disputing the idea that Gentile believers in Jesus had to be circumcised. Here in Romans, Paul is arguing that the blessing promised to Abraham and his descendants is for all people, not just for Jews. Paul notes that God told Abraham he would become "the father of many nations." When "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," he became the spiritual father of "all who believe," whether Jew or Gentile.

The facts Paul appeals to are also different. In Galatians, he observed that Abraham was declared righteous by faith many centuries before the law was given, so none of the requirements of the law could supersede faith as the basis for justification. Here Paul points out that even though Abraham himself was circumcised, God declared him righteous by faith many years before that. So within Abraham's own life there's proof that everyone, whether circumcised or not, is justified by faith.

- ➔ Consider the kind of faith and trust Abraham had in God: He believed God would do just what he had promised, even though everything around him suggested otherwise. How can people today have this same kind of faith for situations in their life that feel "impossible" but that they believe God wants to do something about?

2 After appealing to Abraham's story, Paul describes some of the many benefits (peace with God, hope, etc.) that justification by faith provides to believers in Jesus.

- ➔ Silently re-read what Paul says in this passage and pick out one or two of the benefits of justification that are most meaningful to you in your life right now. Share with the group which ones you chose and why.

3 Paul appeals to the story of Adam to make another case that what Jesus did is for everyone. Paul draws a series of contrasts to show that just as Adam's disobedience had effects that extended to the whole human race, so Jesus' obedience has effects that anyone in the world can receive by faith.

- ➔ Without debating different views that group members hold about whether the story of Adam is literal or figurative, work together to summarize the main details of his story. (You can find it at the beginning of the book of Genesis if you want to verify your recollections.) What is Paul referring to when he speaks of Adam "breaking a command"? Why and how did this affect the whole world? What does Paul have in mind when he speaks of Jesus doing "one righteous act" of obedience? How does Paul say the effects of Jesus' "act" undo the effects of Adam's actions? What brings a person into a position to receive the effects of what Jesus did?

ANSWERS TO ANTICIPATED OBJECTIONS ABOUT SIN AND THE LAW

Romans > Main Argument > Second Phase, continued

INTRODUCTION

Paul now steps back from his argument again, to address more anticipated objections. If people aren't expected to keep the law but are simply told they're forgiven because of what Jesus has done, doesn't this give them an incentive to sin? The more sin, the more forgiveness, right?

Paul addresses this concern from several different angles, correcting four potential misunderstandings of his message. Essentially he explains that people who put their faith in Jesus aren't simply forgiven; they're transferred entirely out of one realm, where they sinned by compulsion, into a new realm, where it's natural for them to obey God.

Paul describes the difference between these realms in several ways. He portrays those under the control of sin as living in this present age and those who've been freed from sin as experiencing the coming age, "living a new life" and serving "in the new way of the Spirit." He also describes the difference between these realms by contrasting life according to *sarx* (NIV "the sinful nature") with life in the Spirit, as he did in Galatians. He contrasts the "mind" or "inner being" that "delights in God's law" with the "body of death" that's a "prisoner of sin." More generally, he speaks of being brought from "death" to "life," or from "slavery to sin" to "slavery to righteousness."

But no matter which image he uses, Paul's point is the same: believers in Jesus have been taken out of one realm and placed in another. They don't have any more incentive to sin, and they shouldn't have any desire or compulsion to sin, because they're new kinds of people, dead to the past, alive to the future, animated by the power of God's Spirit.

All of this leads Paul to the conclusion of this first part of his main argument in Romans. His language reaches heights of eloquence as he marvels at the work of the Spirit in the life of the believer and at the love of God, which has called us and saved us and from which nothing in all creation can ever separate us.

READING

Have four different people read these questions and Paul's answers to them:

- ★ "What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?"
- ★ "What then? Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace?"
- ★ "What shall we say, then? Is the law sinful?"
- ★ "Did that which is good, then, become death to me?"

Then have three people read Paul's conclusion to this part of his main argument, beginning at these places:

- ★ "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

★ “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”

★ “What, then, shall we say in response to these things?” (Ending, “nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”)

DISCUSSION

1 Earlier in Romans Paul explains that circumcision was given to Abraham and his descendants as “a sign, a seal” of the righteousness that comes by faith. Here Paul speaks of baptism as a similar kind of sign and seal. It’s an identification with Jesus in his death and resurrection that shows how we’ve been “brought from death to life.” We don’t need to add baptism to faith in order to be accepted by God, but baptism is something God has given us to illustrate and confirm what our faith has already made true of us.

➔ Have you been baptized? If so, share with the group when and how, and what baptism meant to you at the time. Has your understanding of baptism grown since?

➔ If you haven’t been baptized but are a follower of Jesus, would you like to be baptized? Why or why not?

2 As he answers anticipated objections, Paul explains in several different ways that the law brings *knowledge* of sin but not the *power* to overcome sin. He says the law was given “in order that sin might be recognized as sin,” and “I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law.” He even says that the law arouses “sinful passions” in us: “When the commandment came, sin sprang to life.” (By contrast, “sin is not charged against anyone’s account where there is no law.”) No wonder Paul thought people might misunderstand him and think he believed the law promoted sin!

What he’s actually saying is that when people are told something is “against the rules,” this only makes them want to do it more. That’s why, in the new realm that believers in Jesus are transferred into, there is no law;

people are guided instead by the Spirit. As Paul wrote in Galatians, the Spirit produces in our lives the things there’s *no law against*; when we love our neighbors, we fulfill “the entire law.” What Paul says similarly here in Romans can be translated, “the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death.” If our life is truly in Christ, animated and guided by the Spirit, we are freed from following the law.

➔ Does your experience confirm that as soon as we’re told something is “against the rules,” our natural impulse is to want to do it even more?

➔ Would you feel better or worse equipped to live as a follower of Jesus if you were told, “There are no rules to keep; just be guided by the Holy Spirit, and love God and your neighbor”? If you feel you have some experience in being guided by the Holy Spirit, share with the group how this works practically in your life.

3 In the conclusion to this part of his main argument, Paul contrasts our “present sufferings” (literally “the sufferings of the present time”) with “the glory that will be revealed in us.” Even as we “groan inwardly,” awaiting the full arrival of the coming age, we are already experiencing many of its realities:

- The Holy Spirit lives inside us and prays for us, knowing exactly what we need and what the “will of God” is for us.
- God is working in all things for our good. (This could be translated, “God causes all things to work together” for our good.)
- Nothing in this creation can ever separate us from God’s love for us.

➔ If you’ve been aware at times that you were experiencing one or more of these realities, tell the group about these times.

WHY THE JEWS HAVEN'T RESPONDED TO THE GOSPEL

Romans > Main Argument > Third Phase

INTRODUCTION

Paul concludes his main argument by addressing a final important concern. The Romans are probably prepared by now to grant that God's forgiveness is being *offered* to everyone on an equal basis. But people haven't been *responding* equally. The people God first chose, the Jews, have generally not believed in Jesus, while those who weren't originally chosen, the Gentiles, are responding to the gospel in great numbers. How can all the work that God did with the Israelites throughout their history be having so little effect now, when it's supposed to be reaching its culmination with the coming of the Messiah? Can Paul really be preaching the right gospel if the Jews are largely rejecting what he's saying?

Paul responds to this concern in the third phase of his main argument. He first shows from the Scriptures that throughout the centuries only a small part of Israel actually followed God, just as in his own day, only a small number of Jews (himself included) have believed in Jesus. But all of the Jews have certainly heard and seen enough to be able to respond. So why haven't they? Paul explains that "Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in." God, in sovereign power and

wisdom, has chosen to restrain the response of the Jews in order to create an opportunity for non-Jews to hear about Jesus. God's goal, however, is not to prevent the Jews from responding, but rather to reach the greatest possible number of them by dramatically demonstrating his power and mercy in the lives of people outside Israel. As Paul explains, "Salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious." The inescapable conclusion is that even if the Roman church wants to reach out specifically to Jews, the most effective way for them to do this right now is by supporting Paul's Gentile mission!

As he did after the first two phases of his argument, Paul steps back to reply to some anticipated objections: "Did God reject his people?" "Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery?" But by this point in his long letter, Paul is perhaps so accustomed to using this method that he also breaks into his own argument just after it begins, to raise and address another potential objection: "Is God unjust?" Once again Paul uses his answers to anticipated objections to advance the argument itself.

When he finally reaches his conclusion, he's so overwhelmed by the way God has worked out a means to "have mercy on them all" that he breaks out into worship, blessing God for his attributes in a song of praise that lifts the letter from prose into poetry.

READING

Have a person who's comfortable reading be the main reader for this part of the letter, beginning, "I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying . . ."

Designate another person to be the "voice of the Scriptures" and read the many biblical quotations as each one comes up. (In *The Books of The Bible* these are set off as poetry.)

Have three other people "break in" and read these sections where Paul anticipates and answers objections:

★ Begin, "What then shall we say? Is God unjust?" and end, "He hardens whom he wants to harden."

★ Begin, “I ask then: Did God reject his people?” and end, “May . . . their backs be bent forever.”

★ Begin, “Again I ask: Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery?” and end, “How much more readily will these, the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree!”

Have the whole group read the concluding song of praise out loud together, beginning “Oh, the depth of the riches . . .” and ending, “To him be the glory forever! Amen.”

DISCUSSION

1 Paul’s statement that God has “hardened” some people’s hearts is another of his most controversial sayings. Has God really created certain people to be “objects of his wrath,” in order to “make his power known,” and others to be “objects of his mercy,” to “make the riches of his glory known”? Are some people really “prepared for destruction” while others are “prepared in advance for glory”?

Some interpreters hold that God chooses, before a person is born, before they’ve “done anything good or bad,” whether they will be saved or not. Other interpreters consider Paul’s language of “hardening,” “election,” “prepared in advance,” etc., to be in conversation, if not in tension, with other things he says in this same section that suggest salvation is available to everyone, such as, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved,” and “God has bound everyone over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all.” Both sets of interpreters agree that it’s difficult for human minds to understand exactly how God’s advance choice and people’s moral response fit together.

➞ What do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of the two positions just described? Which do you think accords better with the overall message of the book of Romans? Refer to specific parts of the letter to explain your answer.

➞ Paul says that God’s work in the lives of the Gentiles is supposed to “make Israel envious.” Has seeing what God was doing in someone else’s life ever spurred you on to walk more closely with God yourself?

2 The question of how God now relates to the “people of Israel” is also the subject of much controversy. Once again, interpreters take different positions based on things that Paul says in this section of Romans. Some argue that, since “God’s gifts and his call are irrevocable,” all the promises that God made to the patriarchs still stand, and he will fulfill them literally to the Jewish nation. Others hold that, since “it is not the children by physical descent who are God’s children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham’s offspring,” God doesn’t regard any particular nation as spiritually privileged above the others. Israel’s spiritual destiny is therefore caught up in the destiny of the rest of the world as all nations are invited to respond to the gospel.

➞ Which have you heard more often: the idea that the nation of Israel has a special, separate spiritual destiny from the rest of the world or the idea that Israel is now one of many nations whose people God is calling to follow Jesus? Once again, which idea do you think accords better with the overall message of Romans? Explain your answer by referring to relevant parts of the letter.

3 Paul gives a very clear explanation here of *how* a person can formally become a follower of Jesus. He says, “If you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.” There’s an inner component: we put our faith and trust in Jesus in our hearts. But there’s also an outer component: we publicly state, before human witnesses, that we’ve done this.

➞ If you have faith in Jesus in your heart, but haven’t ever “declared with your mouth” that you believe in him, you can do

this in your group right now. Your group can also help you make a public statement of your faith in Jesus sometime soon at a gathering of a community of his followers near you.

SPIRITUAL GIFTS, THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT, AND “GRAY AREAS”

Romans > Practical Instructions

INTRODUCTION

After explaining and defending his teaching and mission, Paul offers some practical instructions. He encourages and challenges Jesus’ followers in Rome to live the kind of life, particularly in their interactions with one another, characteristic of those who’ve been transferred from the old realm into the new realm. “Do not conform to the pattern of this world” (literally “this age”), Paul writes, “but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” He encourages the Romans, as he did the Corinthians, to serve one another with a diversity of spiritual gifts, and he stresses living out the same character qualities of love, joy, peace, patience, etc., that he described to the Galatians as the “fruit of the Spirit.”

Paul devotes the longest part of these instructions to “gray areas,” activities that believers can legitimately disagree about. Some of the Romans won’t eat meat (perhaps because it’s been offered to idols), while others will. Some observe the Sabbath as a special day of no work, while others don’t. Paul gives them the same advice he gave the Corinthians about food offered to idols. Christians are free before God to develop their own convictions about “disputable matters,” but everything must be done out of love and a desire to build others up. “Whatever you believe about these things,” Paul

tells them, “keep between yourself and God,” and “stop passing judgment on one another.”

At the end of these instructions Paul urges the Romans to see themselves as one people of God, even though they’re Jews and Gentiles and will reach different conclusions about what they can or can’t eat or do on certain days. This gives him one more opportunity to stress his overall theme, that the gospel is for everyone. Christ came, he writes, “so that the promises made to the patriarchs might be confirmed and, moreover, that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.”

READING

Take turns as a group reading one paragraph at a time through Paul’s practical instructions, beginning, “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice,” and ending, “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

NOTE

The conclusion to Romans, where Paul explains his travel plans and extends greetings, will not be the subject of a separate session in this study guide. Paul’s travel plans are discussed in the introduction to session 22, where there was also an opportunity to discuss his greetings. If you didn’t do that question in session 22, you can do it at the end of this one.

DISCUSSION

1 Paul listed over a dozen spiritual gifts as examples for the Corinthians. Here in Romans he mentions several more gifts as examples.

- ➔ List the gifts that Paul describes in 1 Corinthians and those he mentions here. How much overlap is there between the lists? What other gifts have you seen God give people to build up the community of Jesus’ followers? In session 10 you were asked what

you thought your own spiritual gifts were. Based on the models Paul provides here (give generously, lead diligently, show mercy cheerfully), think of a word to describe how you’d like to use each of these gifts. (For example, exercise faith boldly, teach carefully prepared, etc.)

2 In Galatians Paul listed the character qualities that make up the “fruit of the Spirit”: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Here in Romans, beginning where he says “love must be sincere,” he describes how these qualities should be lived out in a community context.

- ➔ Divide up the list of the “the fruit of the Spirit” among the members of your group and have them identify where each quality is mentioned or described here. What more does this help you understand about these qualities?

3 In the Roman Empire, followers of Jesus were often discriminated against or persecuted by the government. But Paul encouraged the believers in Rome not to be afraid of the authorities, or to disobey them, but to “do what is right” and to expect to be protected.

- ➔ What attitude does your government have towards followers of Jesus? Can you safely and confidently put Paul’s counsel here into practice? Can a government become so hostile to Jesus’ followers that this counsel would no longer apply and believers would have to “disobey” at least some laws in order to remain faithful to God? If you’d say yes, give examples.

4 A major challenge for the believers in Rome was to build one community out of two groups that were very different culturally (Jews and Gentiles). These groups had different understandings about how to identify themselves as followers of Jesus. Paul explains to the Romans, as he did to the Corinthians, that “nothing is unclean in itself” (believers can eat and drink anything they want), but no one should do anything that would make

another believer do something they think *might be* wrong. If a person does something they *aren't sure* is right (as they could be led to do by another's example), this is sin. So each person should restrain their own liberties rather than "cause someone else to stumble."

But except for this, each person should come to their own convictions about outward ways of identifying as a follower of Jesus and not judge others for what they decide. And everyone should recognize that these aren't what's most important anyway; it's the inward person that really counts. "The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."

- Have you ever been told that to identify with Jesus, a believer has to adopt a certain lifestyle in areas like these: drinking, smoking, dancing, movies, music, clothing, jewelry, education, politics, etc.? If so, describe briefly what you were told. How would you now respond, based on Paul's instructions here in Romans?

- Have you chosen to use certain outward ways of identifying yourself as a follower of Jesus (such as wearing a cross, not working on Sundays, etc.)? If so, describe to the group what your choices are and how you reached them. How can people, even as they use outward things like these meaningfully, cultivate "righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" as what really matters?

- Now that you've read and discussed Paul's first six letters, what's the most lasting impression you'll be taking away with you?



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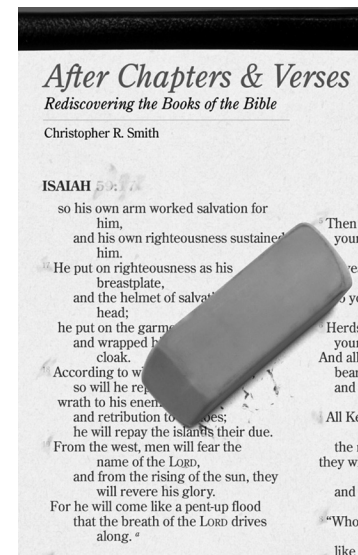
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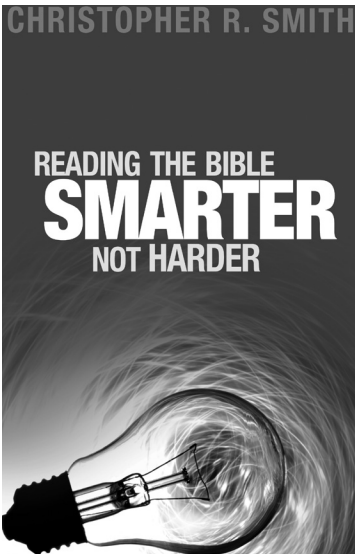
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