

JEREMIAH
BIBLE STUDY SERIES

1 CORINTHIANS

THE AUTHENTIC CHRISTIAN LIFE

DR. DAVID JEREMIAH

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Prepared by Peachtree Publishing Services



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

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CONTENTS

Introduction to the Letter of 1 Corinthians v

LESSON 1	A Church Divided (1 Corinthians 1:1–31)	1
LESSON 2	Spiritual Wisdom from God (1 Corinthians 2:1–16)	13
LESSON 3	The Building and Foundation (1 Corinthians 3:1–23)	23
LESSON 4	Servants of God (1 Corinthians 4:1–21)	33
LESSON 5	Church Discipline (1 Corinthians 5:1–6:20)	45
LESSON 6	Foundation for Marriage (1 Corinthians 7:1–40)	57
LESSON 7	Gray Areas (1 Corinthians 8:1–9:27)	69
LESSON 8	Overcoming Temptation (1 Corinthians 10:1–33)	81
LESSON 9	Proper Conduct in Worship (1 Corinthians 11:1–34)	93
LESSON 10	The Gifts of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:1–31)	105
LESSON 11	It’s All About Love (1 Corinthians 13:1–14:40)	115
LESSON 12	Meaning of the Resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:1–16:24)	127

Leader’s Guide 141

About Dr. David Jeremiah and Turning Point 147

Stay Connected to Dr. David Jeremiah 151

INTRODUCTION TO

The Letter of 1 Corinthians

“I plead with you, brethren . . . that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment” (1 Corinthians 1:10). Parents who have watched their children fight with one other may recognize the tone of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthian church. This is a spiritual father pleading, confronting, and reasoning with his wayward offspring to get along with one another. Paul founded the church and personally led many of its members to the Lord. He had watched them take their first steps in Christ and had a personal interest in their spiritual wellbeing. So imagine his alarm when he began to receive reports of their dysfunction and misbehavior—and when he received letters from them with questions that revealed they had matured little in the years since his departure. Paul’s stern but loving words reveal that he wanted to hold the Corinthian believers accountable for their actions but also show them their immense potential in Christ.

AUTHOR AND DATE

The writer of this letter identifies himself as Paul (see 1:1 and 16:21), and the epistle contains a number of details about his life that fit with what we know of the apostle based on his other letters and the book of Acts. Clement of Rome, an early church father who lived c. AD 35–99, attested to Paul’s authorship as early as AD 96, and today nearly every scholar agrees with this assessment. It is likely that Paul wrote the epistle in AD 56, four years after he had founded the church in Corinth, toward the

close of his three-year residency in Ephesus (see 16:5–9 and Acts 20:31). It is possible that a man named Sosthenes, a respected member of the Corinthian church whom Paul mentions (see 1:1), contributed to certain parts of the letter.

BACKGROUND AND SETTING

Corinth was a sprawling seaport with a history of pagan idolatry. The city contained at least twelve temples, including one dedicated to the Greek god Aphrodite that at one time employed more than 1,000 prostitutes in its worship rituals. Paul arrived in Corinth during his second missionary journey, c. AD 52, after a failed attempt to establish a church in Athens (see Acts 17:16–18:17). At first he preached in the Corinthian synagogue on the Sabbath, but when most of the Jewish audience there rejected his message, he reached out to the Gentiles and witnessed many converts to the Christian faith. When Paul's journeys took him away from Corinth, he left the congregation in the capable hands of Aquila and Priscilla. As was the case with other churches he founded, Paul stayed in contact with the believers in the city. He often checked on their progress in the faith when he encountered other missionaries who had visited the city.

KEY THEMES

Several key themes are prominent in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. The first is that *believers must remain united* (see 1:10–4:21). The congregation in Corinth had broken in factions that each supported a favorite Christian teacher—including Paul, Apollos, Cephas (Peter), and a group known only as the “Christ party” (see 1:12). Furthermore, the believers were suing one another in public courts. Paul urged the Corinthian believers in the church to embrace their unity as members of the body of Christ.

A second theme is that *believers in Christ must remain separate from the world* (see 5:1–6:20). The Corinthians had allowed the pagan practices in the city to infiltrate the church. They had developed a tolerance for

idolatry and sexual immorality within their fellowship, even taking pride in their tolerance “that a man has his father’s wife” (5:1). Paul confronts them on this spiritual immaturity and offers instructions on how to honor God in all aspects of their lives.

A third theme is that *believers must be cautious in exercising the freedom they have received in Christ* (see 8:1–11:1). Some of the believers were testing the limits of freedom they had received in Christ by attending feasts where food was sacrificed to idols. They reasoned that because the idols were not real, there was no harm in eating the meat. However, Paul pointed out that this attitude had proved to be a stumbling block to others in the congregation who believed that Christians should steer clear of anything remotely associated with idols. He instructed the Corinthians to put the needs of others ahead of their own freedom.

A fourth theme is that *believers receive certain spiritual gifts from God to serve the church* (see 12:1–13:13). The believers were evidently placing greater value on certain gifts of the Spirit and holding those who possessed such gifts in higher esteem than others. Paul corrects this mindset by stating that God gives the gifts He chooses to individuals in the church—and all of these gifts are necessary for the body of Christ to function. He adds that, above all, the believers must practice love—for without it all of the other gifts will be used in vain.

A final theme is that the *resurrection is the cornerstone of the Christian faith*. Some of the believers were questioning whether their own resurrection would occur. Paul reminds them that Jesus is the “firstfruits” and proof of their own resurrection to come. He stresses that without the resurrection of Jesus, their faith is completely in vain—as is his ministry as an apostle of the gospel.

KEY APPLICATIONS

The believers in Corinth faced many issues as they struggled to maintain their Christian identity in a city filled with immorality, idolatry, and competing philosophies. In many ways their situation was similar to ours.

LETTER OF 1 CORINTHIANS

For this reason, we would do well to listen to Paul's warnings and advice and apply them to our lives. Paul's letter rebukes and corrects—but it also serves to focus our attention on Jesus. In the end, we come to realize the incredible love Jesus has for us as we take confidence in the fact that His victory over the grave guarantees our own future resurrection.

1 Corinthians 1:1–31

What are some reasons that divisions occur today in the church?

[illegible]

SETTING THE STAGE

Imagine for a minute that you were a resident of this busy seaport back in the first century. As the day drew to an end, the streets would fill up with revelers intent on a night of pleasure. In the warm congenial climate, the old and young alike would congregate outdoors, enjoying the evening hours while the last rays of the sun fell on the many temples, shrines, and palaces located throughout the city.

As this was taking place, the members of the church would be making the trek to their place of worship—most likely a large room in a private house or a warehouse that some Christian merchant had cleaned up and made available for the congregation to use. The space would have been plain and unassuming . . . certainly not like the gorgeous pagan temples or even the local Jewish synagogue in the city. Those who attended this church would have found the differences to be striking.

The congregation itself was composed of a mixed group of people from many different backgrounds of life. Some would have been members of the Jewish race, while the rest of the body would have consisted of Gentiles from various nationalities. Some would have worn rings that denoted they were free, while those without such jewelry would have been slaves. The occupations of the members would have ranged from day workers, to merchants, to nobles, to even government officials and soldiers.

This is the diverse group of people to whom Paul wrote 1 Corinthians. As you look at the composition of this congregation, you begin to understand why there were so many issues for Paul to address. We can be thankful that he did, for his advice guides us even today.

EXPLORING THE TEXT

Paul's Greeting (1 Corinthians 1:1–9)

¹ Paul, called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God,
and Sosthenes our brother,

³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

2. What does Paul express about the church in his opening words of greeting? What does he want the believers to remember about their calling in Christ (see verses 4–8)?

A Need for Unity (1 Corinthians 1:10–17)

¹⁰ Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. ¹¹ For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe's household, that there are contentions among you. ¹² Now I say this, that each of you says, "I am of Paul," or "I am of Apollos," or "I am of Cephas," or "I am of Christ." ¹³ Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

¹⁴ I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵ lest anyone should say that I had baptized in my own name. ¹⁶ Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas. Besides, I do not know whether I baptized any other. ¹⁷ For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect.

3. Paul follows up his words of thanksgiving by addressing the first problem that he had learned was impacting the church. What was evidently the source of the divisions that were occurring among the church members (see verses 10–13)?

4. It is possible that some in the church were boasting of who had baptized them when they came to Christ. What does Paul say about this attitude (see verses 14–17)?

The Wisdom of the Gospel (1 Corinthians 1:18–25)

¹⁸ For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

¹⁹ For it is written:

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
And bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent.”

²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. ²² For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, ²⁴ but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

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7. The believers had come from many different backgrounds, but most were from the lower working classes (some were slaves) and thus not “wise” like the philosophers in Corinth. Why do you think Paul points this fact out to the congregation (see verses 26–27)?

8. In this section, the main issue Paul addresses is the believers’ “boasting” about following one leader over another. What conclusion does Paul reach about this boasting? In who and in what are the believers to “glory” or boast (see verses 28–31)?

REVIEWING THE STORY

Paul opened his letter with a personal greeting and thanksgiving and then urged the believers to not allow divisions to separate their congregation. He exposed the believers' foolishness in sacrificing their unity just to align themselves with human leaders. Paul then contrasted two different reactions to the cross: the reaction of those who ascribe to the world's wisdom and those who have put their trust in God's wisdom. Paul pointed out that what appears to be foolish according to human standards—that the Savior of the world was an executed Roman criminal—is exactly what God has chosen to bring salvation. All the believers were partakers in this salvation . . . and thus there was no room or cause for boasting.

9. What did Paul assure the Corinthian believers that the Lord Jesus Christ would do for them (see 1 Corinthians 1:8)?

10. What news had Paul received regarding the Corinthian church (see 1 Corinthians 1:11–12)?

11. What Christian truth was a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles (see 1 Corinthians 1:23)?

12. What is God's unconventional strategy for using human wisdom, foolishness, strength, and weakness to accomplish His will (see 1 Corinthians 1:27–29)?

APPLYING THE MESSAGE

13. What are some of the things that cause divisions between you and other believers?

14. Which aspects of the Christian faith do your non-Christian friends consider foolish?

REFLECTING ON THE MEANING

Jesus wants us to set aside the world's standards of success, prominence, and promotion so that He can move into our lives and make us into the people whom He desires us to be. When we become "nobodies" in the world, God can make us "somebodies" in His kingdom. When we have His wisdom, we have all of the treasures of heaven at our disposal. When we have His righteousness, we become mighty in His hands. When we have His sanctification, we are clean vessels in whom He can work. When we have His redemption, we have that which is greater than silver or gold . . . because it has been purchased with the blood of Jesus Christ.

Dr. A. J. Gordon, the great nineteenth-century preacher, was once walking through the World's Fair when he saw a man in the distance vigorously pumping water. The man seemed to be doing a good job, because water was spewing all over the place. But as Dr. Gordon came closer, he discovered that what he initially thought was a man was actually a wooden figure. Furthermore, an artesian well was spewing forth all that water, and it was doing so under its own power. In fact, it was the well that was making the wooden man pump.

If we are not careful, we may get confused as to who is doing the work in our lives. We may get the idea that power comes from our own efforts. We may convince ourselves that *we* are the ones doing the pumping—that *we* are causing the wonderful things to happen in our lives. But if we really understand what the Bible says, we recognize that we are simply tools in God's hands. He is the One doing the work. Therefore, we need to become

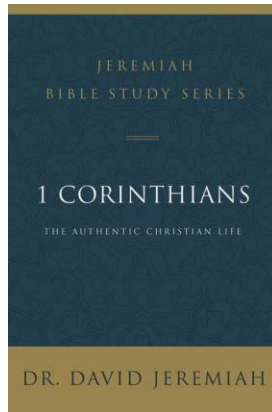
weak enough, foolish enough, low enough, and humble enough for God to work through us.

If we do, we will discover this results in a lifelong project. But it is a *worthwhile* project, because it's the secret of power in the life of a believer.

JOURNALING YOUR RESPONSE

What are some ways you can humble yourself and let God work through you?

[illegible]



1 CORINTHIANS

JEREMIAH BIBLE STUDY SERIES

The apostle Paul founded many churches in the Roman Empire, including one in the prominent city of Corinth. As the commercial capital of the region, its citizens were rich, immoral, and had little self-control. Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthians to urge them to live as citizens of God's kingdom and separate themselves from the sinful practices of the world around them. He offers practical guidance on each issue they are facing, revealing to them—and us today—what it truly means to be a member of the Body of Christ and truly love one another as Jesus first loved us.

The *Jeremiah Bible Study Series* captures Dr. David Jeremiah's forty-plus years of commitment to teaching the Word of God. In each study, he will help you understand what the Bible says, what it meant to the people at the time it was written, and what it means to you today. Along the way, you will gain insights into the text, identify key stories and themes, and be challenged to apply the truth you find in your life.

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