



# **Challenging church**

**1 CORINTHIANS 1 – 9**

by Mark Dever

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# introduction: good book guides

Every Bible-study group is different—yours may take place in a church building, in a home or in a cafe, on a train, over a leisurely mid-morning coffee or squashed into a 30-minute lunch break. Your group may include new Christians, mature Christians, non-Christians, mums and tots, students, businessmen or teens. That’s why we’ve designed these *Good Book Guides* to be flexible for use in many different situations.

Our aim in each session is to uncover the meaning of a passage, and see how it fits into the “big picture” of the Bible. But that can never be the end. We also need to appropriately apply what we have discovered to our lives. Let’s take a look at what is included:

- ↻ **Talkabout:** Most groups need to “break the ice” at the beginning of a session, and here’s the question that will do that. It’s designed to get people talking around a subject that will be covered in the course of the Bible study.
- ↓ **Investigate:** The Bible text for each session is broken up into manageable chunks, with questions that aim to help you understand what the passage is about. **The Leader’s Guide** contains **guidance on questions**, and sometimes ☑ additional “follow-up” questions.
- 🗨️ **Explore more (optional):** These questions will help you connect what you have learned to other parts of the Bible, so you can begin to fit it all together like a jig-saw; or occasionally look at a part of the passage that’s not dealt with in detail in the main study.
- ➡️ **Apply:** As you go through a Bible study, you’ll keep coming across **apply** sections. These are questions to get the group discussing what the Bible teaching means in practice for you and your church. 🗨️ **Getting personal** is an opportunity for you to think, plan and pray about the changes that you personally may need to make as a result of what you have learned.
- ⬆️ **Pray:** We want to encourage prayer that is rooted in God’s word—in line with His concerns, purposes and promises. So each session ends with an opportunity to review the truths and challenges highlighted by the Bible study, and turn them into prayers of request and thanksgiving.

The **Leader’s Guide** and introduction provide historical background information, explanations of the Bible texts for each session, ideas for **optional extra** activities, and guidance on how best to help people uncover the truths of God’s word.



# why study 1 Corinthians?

Even today, Jesus is still a figure of intense interest and admiration for millions. His stories and sayings still inhabit our minds 2000 years after He lived, and to many there is something compellingly beautiful about Him.

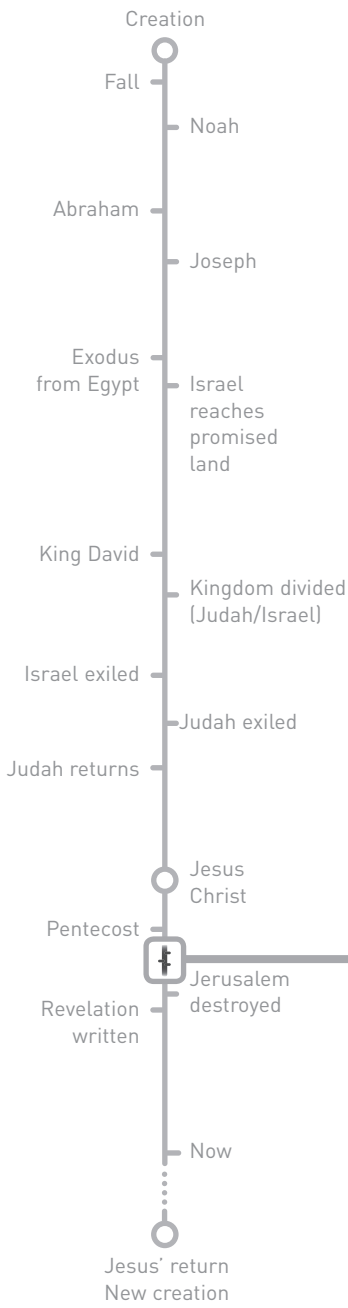
But then there's the church. If you've grown up in a church, you've probably got some good reasons to be disillusioned with it. The church seems like a boring topic for most, and a reluctantly fulfilled duty for many. If you introduce the subject, you'll often find it meets with responses ranging from a mild disinterest to a real dislike.

And we can understand why. Churches say they have the best news in the world, that they have the answer to our problems, that they are God's embassies on earth; and yet churches are made up of people like you and me, who are grumpy, irritable, unfaithful, selfish, and worse. Too possessive of small things and too casual about great ones. Too defensive of our interests and too often ignoring God.

And as that is sadly true of churches today, so it was of the church God had set up in Corinth through the apostle Paul. It was young, it was full of life, and it was just as full of problems. We see no single congregation in the New Testament in which there were more issues, and of such differing kinds. What would God say to such a challenging church? What did they need to be excited by, to listen to, to learn?

This Good Book Guide will help you to open up the first nine chapters of the letter of 1 Corinthians. It is a long, varied and often complex book. These studies are not a hike through every small detail, but more of a helicopter ride enabling you to see its peaks, as you hear what God said to His church in Corinth, and what God still says to His church today.





## BIBLE TIMELINE

Where does 1 Corinthians fit into the whole story of God's word?

**1 CORINTHIANS**  
c55AD

49-50AD Paul preaches in Corinth and sets up the church

51AD Paul leaves Corinth

c55AD Paul sends 1 Corinthians and then 2 Corinthians

# 1

1 Corinthians 1 v 1-9

## COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS

### talkabout

1. How forgetful are you, and what sort of things do you tend to forget?

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- Have you ever forgotten something which led to a comedy moment? Or a serious problem?

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### investigate

 Read 1 Corinthians 1 v 1-9

2. Who is this letter from and to?

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#### DICTIONARY

**Apostle (v 1):** someone chosen and sent by Jesus to teach and serve the Christian church.

**Sosthenes (v 1):** possibly a former Jewish leader (see Acts 18 v 17). Now one of Paul's co-workers.

**Sanctified (v 2):** made clean and pure.

**Holy (v 2):** set apart; totally pure.

**Grace (v 3,4):** undeserved kindness.

God had used Paul to establish the church in Corinth in Greece during his second "missionary journey", in about 50-51AD (you can read about it in Acts 18). It was a few years later, probably between 52 and 55AD, that Paul wrote this letter to the church God had planted through him.

Corinth was a major crossroads between the eastern and western parts of the Roman Empire. A great trading centre, with people moving in and out all the time, it had a reputation for immorality and for its many religions. In other words, its society was much like many today.

3. Flick forward to these verses later on in the letter to see what this church was like:

- 1 v 10-11
- 4 v 18
- 5 v 1
- 6 v 6-7
- 11 v 20-21
- 15 v 34

• Is this a church you would like to be a part of?

4. Back in chapter 1, pick out the ways Paul describes what has happened to these Corinthians, and fill in the first blank column in the table below:

	What?	How?
v 2		
v 4		
v 5		
v 9		

Paul is helping them to recall the riches of God’s blessing of Jesus. And did you notice that in verse 2, these Christians are described as already “sanctified (ie: set apart as pure) in Christ Jesus”; but they are also “called to be holy” (to *become* set apart as pure). So are they set apart, or not?!

God has declared Christians to be set apart in right relationship with Him, because Christ’s holiness and righteousness has been accounted, or freely given, to them. A Christian’s status is “holy”. But they are also called to



*become* holy, to have lives which more fully reflect God's character, lives like they were meant to have. Having been made holy in Christ, they are now to live more and more as the people He has made them to be, living in accordance with their status as holy people.

5. What is the church looking forward to?

6. What will they be on that day? Why can they be confident they will still be Christians then?

7. Why is verse 7 an encouraging reminder for a church, particularly if it is small or struggling?



### getting personal

Do you ever think to yourself that you could do this, or that, as a Christian, if only you had been given this gift (better memory, sense of humour, teaching ability) or that circumstance (more time, greater wealth, different family, bigger church)?

Verse 7 says there is **no** spiritual gift you lack as a church. In which area do you need to stop making excuses and get on with living and working for God? Or do you need to stop thinking you can do everything yourself, and remember that you need to use your gifts for your church, and rely on others in your church to use their gifts to help and encourage you?





8. Who has blessed, or gifted, these Corinthians in this way? What are we told about His character in verse 9, and why is this important?

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9. What does Paul tell his readers he is doing in verse 4?

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10. Think about what the Corinthian church was like. What is surprising about verse 4?

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- Why do you think Paul began his letter by talking about what God had given them?

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11. Go back to the table on page 8. For each of those verses, fill in "How" it is that God gives His church each of the blessings you've listed in the "What" column.





## explore more

optional

### ▶ Read Romans 8 v 31b-32

*How are Christians able to know that God really will give them what they need to keep going in their faith?*



## apply

12. What do you think Paul wanted the Corinthians to do as they read these verses? What would he want us to do today?

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13. How can we imitate Paul:

- in our prayers?

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- as we speak to our Christian friends?

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14. Look at the table on page 8. Which blessing has particularly struck you?

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- How can you make sure you call God's generosity to mind regularly through the course of each day?



## getting personal

Have you forgotten how much you have been given by God in Christ? Do you tend to focus on what you haven't been given in life, rather than on what you have?

Which blessing from God could you give thanks for each day for a month?

Who can you share that blessing with this week?



## pray

- For other Christians, based on verse 4.
- For your church, based on verse 7.
- For yourself, giving thanks for a particular blessing you've been reminded of in this passage.
- For people, situations and issues which are on your group's hearts at the moment.





# **Challenging church**

**1 Corinthians**

**LEADER'S GUIDE**

# Leader's Guide: Introduction

## INTRODUCTION

Leading a Bible study can be a bit like herding cats—everyone has a different idea of what the passage could be about, and a different line of enquiry that they want to pursue. But a good group leader is more than someone who just referees this kind of discussion. You will want to:

- correctly understand and handle the Bible passage. But also...
- encourage and train the people in your group to do this for themselves. Don't fall into the trap of spoon-feeding people by simply passing on the information in the Leader's Guide. Then...
- make sure that no Bible study is finished without everyone knowing how the passage is relevant for them. What changes do you all need to make in the light of the things you have been learning? And finally...
- encourage the group to turn all that has been learned and discussed into prayer.

Your Bible-study group is unique, and you are likely to know better than anyone the capabilities, backgrounds and circumstances of the people you are leading. That's why we've designed these guides with a number of optional features. If they're a quiet bunch, you might want to spend longer on talkabout. If your time is limited, you can choose to skip explore more, or get people to look at these questions at home. And each study has an optional extra section, which helps introduce or reinforce a theme of the passage. As leader, you can adapt and select the material to the needs of your particular group.

So what's in the Leader's Guide?

The main thing that this Leader's Guide will help you to do is to understand the major teaching points in the passage you are studying, and how to apply them. As well as guidance on the questions, the Leader's Guide for each session contains the following important sections:

## THE BIG IDEA

One key sentence will give you the main point of the session. This is what you should be aiming to have fixed in people's minds as they leave the Bible study. And it's the point you need to head back towards when the discussion goes off at a tangent.

## SUMMARY

An overview of the passage, including plenty of useful historical background information.

## OPTIONAL EXTRA


Usually this is an introductory activity that ties in with the main theme of the Bible study, and is designed to "break the ice" at the start of a session. Or it may be a way of illustrating a complex or important point, or reinforcing and extending an application towards the end of the session.

So let's take a look at the various different features of a Good Book Guide:

## talkabout

Each session kicks off with a discussion question, based on the group's opinions or experiences. It's designed to get people talking and thinking in a general way about the main subject of the Bible study.

## investigate

The first thing you and your group need to know is what the Bible passage is about, which is the purpose of these questions. But watch out—people may come up with answers based on their experiences or teaching they have heard in the past, without referring to the passage at all. It's amazing how often we can get through a Bible study without actually looking at the Bible! If you're stuck for an answer, the Leader's Guide contains guidance on questions. These are the answers to direct your group to. This information isn't meant to be read out to people—ideally, you want them to discover these answers from the Bible for themselves. Sometimes there are optional follow-up questions (see  in guidance on questions) to help you help your group get to the answer.

## explore more

These questions generally point people to other relevant parts of the Bible. They are useful for helping your group to see how the passage fits into the “big picture” of the whole Bible. These sections are OPTIONAL—only use them if you have time. Remember that it's better to finish in good time having really grasped one big thing from the passage, than to try to cram everything in.

## apply

We want to encourage you to spend more time working at application—too often, it is simply tacked on at the end. In the Good Book Guides, apply sections are mixed in with the investigate sections of the study. We hope that people will realise that application is not just an optional extra, but rather, the whole purpose of studying the

Bible. We do Bible study so that our lives can be changed by what we hear from God's word. If you skip the application, the Bible study hasn't achieved its purpose.

These questions draw out practical lessons that we can all learn from the Bible passage. You can review what has been learned so far, and think about practical differences that this should make in our churches and our lives. The group gets the opportunity to talk about what they personally have learned.

## getting personal

These can be done at home, but it is well worth allowing a few moments of quiet reflection during the study for each person to think and pray about specific changes they need to make in their own lives. Why not have a time for reporting back at the beginning of the following session, so that everyone can be encouraged and challenged by one another to make application a priority?

## pray

In Acts 4 v 25-30 the first Christians quoted Psalm 2 as they prayed in response to the persecution of the apostles by the Jewish religious leaders. Today however, it's not as common for Christians to base prayers on the truths of God's word as it once was. As a result, our prayers tend to be weak, superficial and self-centered rather than bold, visionary and God-centered.

The prayer section is based on what has been learned from the Bible passage. How different our prayer times would be if we were genuinely responding to what God has said to us through His word.

# 1

1 Corinthians 1 v 1-9

# COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS

## THE BIG IDEA

God has given Christians amazing blessings in Christ both now and for all eternity. We need to remember these blessings ourselves, and remind others of them.

## SUMMARY

Paul usually tried to begin his letters with some kind of thanksgiving, but this was a church famous for its faults. We see no single church in the New Testament in which there were more problems, and of such differing kinds. We might think that if there were going to be a church Paul was not able to give thanks for, this would be it!

But in fact Paul does “thank God because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus” (v 4). And as he does so, he encourages them and us to look at all the riches Christians have; to look at all the blessings these Christians in Corinth knew, given to them by God and in Christ. There is a reason that Christians have sometimes been called simply “the blessed”.

## OPTIONAL EXTRA

Contact your group *before* you meet up for this opening study, and suggest they read through 1 Corinthians (either the whole book or chapters 1 – 9, which this Good Book Guide covers). This will allow people to see the general flow of the book before they study small parts in greater detail. Ask them to think about:

- the tone of the letter.
- the general themes of the letter.
- the challenges of the letter.
- what the letter tells us about the church in Corinth, and about their Lord, Jesus.

## GUIDANCE ON QUESTIONS

**1. How forgetful are you, and what sort of things do you tend to forget?**

- **Have you ever forgotten something which led to a comedy moment? Or a serious problem?**

Get your group talking, and laughing, about forgetfulness. (If you have couples in the group, they may well remember each others’ forgetfulness more than they do their own!) It would be helpful to have at least one recollection of a forgetful moment which caused a real problem—perhaps you could think of one to share yourself if necessary.

**2. Who is this letter from and to?** This is a letter written by Paul, an apostle (or “messenger”) of Christ Jesus, chosen by God, and also from Sosthenes. He was clearly with Paul when this letter was written (probably in Ephesus); what is interesting about him is that he may well have been the Sosthenes mentioned in Acts 18 as God worked through Paul to establish this church in Corinth. When a frustrated mob was unable to have Paul successfully convicted and dealt with by Roman officials, we read in Acts 18 v 17 that “they all turned on Sosthenes the synagogue ruler and beat him in front of the court”. At this stage he was a Jewish leader opposing Paul—but it appears from 1 Corinthians 1 v 1 that he was converted to Christ.

The letter is written to the Christian church in Corinth.

**3. Flick forward to these verses later on in the letter to see what this church was like:** The church God had founded in

Corinth was young, full of life, and just as full of problems. (You might like to divide your group into pairs and give them a couple of verses each to look at, to save some time, and then ask them briefly to tell the rest of the group what they saw.)

- **1 v 10-11:** Divisions and quarreling
- **4 v 18:** Arrogance
- **5 v 1:** Sexual immorality including sleeping with close relations
- **6 v 6-7:** Suing one another in court
- **11 v 20-21:** Getting drunk during the Lord's Supper meal
- **15 v 34:** Ignorance of God leading to sinful behavior
- **Is this a church you would like to be a part of?** Most of us would not want to join this church, with all its problems! This part of Q2 is to encourage your group to make a "value judgement" about this particular church, based on what the verses have shown them has been taking place within the congregation.

**4. Back in chapter 1, pick out the ways Paul describes what has happened to these Corinthians, and fill in the first blank column in the table below:** The table can be completed roughly like this (only complete the first column at this point: the How? column is for Q11):

	What?	How?
<b>v 2</b>	Sanctified, called to be holy	In (ie: united in relationship with) Christ Jesus
<b>v 4</b>	Given God's grace	In Christ Jesus
<b>v 5</b>	Given wonderful treasures in every way	In him (ie: Christ)

	What?	How?
<b>v 9</b>	Called into fellowship (ie: relationship) with Christ	n/a

The text below the table in the Study Guide deals with the "now-but-not-yet" nature of a Christian's holiness. We are holy (in and through Jesus)—but we need to become holy through living His way. You might like to use the illustration of a commoner who marries into a royal family. The moment she says "I will" to her prince, she becomes royalty, through union with him. But she also needs to behave as royalty, to live up to the status she now has. And she might find it takes a great deal of effort, and some time, before she is able to do that perfectly!

**5. What is the church looking forward to?** To Christ being "revealed" (v 7). You might like to ask the group what event Paul is thinking of when he talks of Christ being "revealed"; it is the day when He is able to be seen physically in all His glory on earth, what we usually tend to call His "return". As they looked toward that day, this church had an eager expectancy about them; they knew that, unlike our world's cruel counterfeits which promise so much but in the end deliver nothing, this would definitely come to pass.

**6. What will they be on that day? Why can they be confident they will still be Christians then?** The Corinthian church was full of people who were involved in various kinds of sin, but Paul assured them that on the day of Christ, there will be nothing to lay against the Christian; they will be blameless. Paul is not talking about *feeling* guilty, but *being* guilty before God—and it is this guilt Christians will be





without on the final day of judgment (so they were able to eagerly wait for it, instead of dreading it).

They could know they would still be Christians on that day because God would strengthen them to keep them going until they made it there. Christians have been given the great gift of perseverance.

**7. Why is verse 7 an encouraging reminder for a church, particularly if it is small or struggling?** Verse 7 is greatly encouraging to any church, as it was meant to be for the Corinthian church. It tells us there is nothing God should have given us that He hasn't given us. We have all we need for what God has called us to do. The "you" in v 7 is plural, so Paul is not saying that each individual Christian has every gift from God, but that as a fellowship they have all they need.



• **APPLY:** Some of the spiritual gifts we need have been given to other members of our church family: what does this mean we need to do as individual Christians? We need to rely on one another and put our abilities at others' disposal, if as a church we are to serve God in all the ways He calls us to. (This question leads into the Getting Personal section after Q7).

**8. Who has blessed, or gifted, these Corinthians in this way? What are we told about His character in verse 9, and why is this important?** It was God who had done all this for the Corinthians; all these blessings stand as tokens of God's own love. And God is faithful (in the Greek original, it is "faithful is God", as if to stress the point); Christians can have confidence

that they can trust God to keep delivering His promised help, each day and to the very end.

**9. What does Paul tell his readers he is doing in verse 4?** Paul thanks God for the Corinthian Christians—he knows that God is the source of all these blessings, that there is nothing good that Paul is seeing in the Corinthians that hasn't come from God Himself. Paul knew it was God who was behind the calling and blessing of these people.

**10. Think about what the Corinthian church was like. What is surprising about verse 4?** That Paul gives thanks at all for this church! If we were thinking in a worldly way, the *last* thing in the world we would do for such a church is to thank God for them! They had been full of problems, it seems, ever since their founding.

• **Why do you think Paul began his letter by talking about what God had given them?** Because he wants these Christians to remember the blessings God has given them.



• **What does Paul see as the most important thing about these people he's writing to?** That they had God's saving grace in their lives. Important as some of the sins of this congregation were—whether done through ignorance or, even worse, in defiance—they paled before what God had done for them. So Paul thanks God for them, and tells them he's thanking God for them.

**11. Go back to the table on page 8. For each of those verses, fill in "How" it is that God gives His church each of the**

**blessings you've listed in the "What" column.** See table previous page. Notice throughout these verses that God is pointing the Corinthians to the One through whom supremely He has blessed them—Christ.

### EXPLORE MORE

**Read Romans 8 v 31b-32. How are Christians able to know that God really will give them what they need to keep going in their faith?** Because in giving us Christ, God has given us the best He could! If God has given us His only Son, He will give us everything that we need for life and godliness.

**12. APPLY: What do you think Paul wanted the Corinthians to do as they read these verses? What would he want us to do today?** Paul wanted the Corinthians to be encouraged in their faith and grateful to God for their blessings, to remind them of God's grace. The most important thing about them is that God has purchased them and His Spirit is at work in them. He wants the same for us.

### 13. APPLY: How can we imitate Paul:

- **in our prayers?** By giving thanks for our Christian brothers and sisters, even those who are struggling, who frustrate us, who are immature and unsteady in their Christian lives.
- **as we speak to our Christian friends?** By reminding our Christian friends about how blessed they are by God in Christ.

If time allows, refer back to Q1 and ask the group what effect it has when individual Christians or whole churches forget how God has blessed them.

**14. APPLY: Look at the table on page 8. Which blessing has particularly struck**

**you?** You might want to give your group time to write down an individual answer to this, and then ask people to share what they wrote down, and why. Then move on to think as a group about how you can regularly remember God's generosity.

• **How can you make sure you call God's generosity to mind regularly through the course of each day?** Ideas for how to call to mind the specific blessings of 1 Corinthians 1 v 1-9 during the day could include:

- When you look in the mirror or see your reflection, remember that God sees you as pure, sanctified, because you are in Christ.
- Whenever you spend money on something, remember that in Christ God has given you grace and spiritual gifts.
- Whenever you look at your watch, remember that one day the Lord Jesus Christ will be revealed.
- Whenever you see someone holding hands, remember that God will keep hold of you until Jesus returns.

Of course, your group may well have different and better ideas than these! More general possibilities include: texting one another; setting an alarm with a message on a laptop; sticking a verse on the desk at work or in a room at home.



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