

Women's Bible Study

A TWO-YEAR JOURNEY THROUGH
THE STORY OF GOD

Week 9 | We are Called to a Life of Love | 1,2 Corinthians; 1,2 Thessalonians

1 Corinthians: *Spiritual maturity is proven not by impressive gifts, but by a life of love*

The epistle of 1 Corinthians was written by Paul to the Christian community at Corinth—a bustling cosmopolitan seaport that was the provincial capital of Greece. The city was proud of its magnificent temples to pagan gods. It was famous for its pursuit of Greek philosophy, its free-wheeling sexual immorality, and its abundant wealth.

Paul visited Corinth on his second missionary journey (Acts 18:1-18) and Paul lived and worked there for a year and a half. Paul founded the church at Corinth and he had strong ties with the believers there. After Paul left Corinth and moved on to other cities, Paul received word from at least two sources that things were not going well back in Corinth, so Paul wrote this letter to serve as a strong rebuke to the church at Corinth.

Paul had received a distressing report from some of the believers in Corinth that there was disgraceful behavior in the church. The Christians in Corinth were not growing in spiritual maturity; rather, their lives were scandalous. In Paul's letter to the Corinthians, he doesn't question the salvation of the Christians at Corinth, but he does *rebuke them forcefully* for their worldly and ungodly lifestyles. Their sinful behavior will prevent their progress in spiritual maturity. Their sinful behavior will nullify their Christian witness. Paul is ashamed of them.

Paul had received a report that identified five problems, and Paul deals with these issues in chapters 1-6.

- There were divisions and quarreling and factions among the believers at Corinth (1:11-12; 3:1-4)
- They were being led astray by arguments based on Greek philosophy and wisdom (1:18-21)
- They were arrogant, striving after wealth and honor and acclaim (4:7-14)
- There was blatant sexual immorality among them, and they proudly tolerated it (5:1-5; 6:12-20)
- They were taking legal actions against one another, bringing the church into public disrepute (6:1-11)

In chapters 7-10, Paul responded to several practical questions that the church had asked in a prior letter to Paul. Then, beginning in the middle of chapter 11, Paul addresses the appalling ugliness of the Corinthians' behavior.

An astonishing indictment: the meetings of the church at Corinth do more harm than good!

1. Read 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 *The Corinthian believers are shamefully self-indulgent*

- a. What sinful behavior occurs in the Corinthians' church meetings? (11:17-19)
- b. How is selfishness, rather than reverence, apparent in these meetings? (11:20-22, 33-34)
- c. The Corinthians are treating the Lord's Supper as a means of self-gratification. What is the spiritual purpose of the Lord's Supper? (11:22-26)

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In chapters 12-14, Paul discusses the important topic of spiritual gifts. A *spiritual gift* is a spiritual empowerment for service—it is a manifestation of the Holy Spirit given to believers for the common good of the body of Christ.

Impressive spiritual gifts do not imply impressive spiritual maturity.

Although the behavior of the Corinthians was scandalous, their church meetings were lively, noisy, and outgoing—characterized by a boisterous display of spiritual gifts. This church is not lacking any spiritual gift (1 Cor. 1:4-7), but nevertheless, they are spiritually immature—mere infants in Christ (1 Corinthians 3:1-3).

2. Read 1 Corinthians 12:4-11. *Spiritual gifts are not for our personal glory*

- a. What is the purpose of spiritual gifts? (12:7)
- b. Who determines what spiritual gifts each believer receives? (12:11)
- c. What sorts of gifts of the Spirit were present in the church in that day? (12:8-10)

3. Read 1 Corinthians 12:12-27. *The church is like a human body; it is the body of Christ*

- a. What does this metaphor of the church as a body teach you about the worth of each individual? (12:24-25)
- b. *Personal reflection:* How does this metaphor of the church as a body help you understand your individual and unique role in the work of the people of God? (See 12:18,27)

There is no spiritual maturity if there is no Spirit-enabled love for others

4. Read 1 Corinthians 13.

We enjoy the beauty of this eloquent description of love. We read 1 Corinthians 13 at weddings, and it is appropriate to do so. However, in the context of this letter to the Corinthians, chapter 13 is a *strong rebuke*. Paul rebukes the Corinthian church because they are proud of the spiritual gifts they had been given, but they fail to live in love toward one another. The Christians at Corinth lacked *love*, and this was preventing their progress in spiritual maturity. The believers at Corinth had correct doctrine, but they were lacking in love. They had every spiritual gift for service, but spiritual gifts are of no value if there is no love.

Personal reflection: As we raise our children, we tend to be much more focused on helping them acquire skills than in promoting the development of character qualities, especially love. What steps can you take to change this?

Spiritual maturity is evidenced by a heart of love

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The Book of 2 Corinthians: *You are a new creation; live in devotion to Christ*

The gospel-transformed life reflects God's values of humility and generosity.

After Paul sent his stinging rebuke to the sinful Corinthian church in the letter of 1 Corinthians, many of the people in the church rejected Paul's rebuke and questioned Paul's authority. The problems in the church continued. Paul then made a personal visit to the church at Corinth—a visit Paul describes as a “painful visit (2 Cor. 2:1),” but Paul wasn't able to stay very long. After his visit, Paul wrote another letter to them, and this letter, Paul says, was written out of “anguish of heart and with many tears.” This “painful letter” has not been preserved for us—it's not a part of Scripture—but although the letter made them sorrowful; it resulted in sincere repentance. (2 Corinthians 7:8-12).

Paul wrote this letter—the letter we call 2 Corinthians—in order to comfort these sorrowful Christians, to reassure them of his love, and also to encourage them to live with a whole-hearted devotion to Christ.

This epistle has three sections:

- In chapters 1-7, Paul reconciles with the Corinthians believers.
- In chapters 8-9, Paul challenges them to contribute generously to the needs of the poor in Jerusalem.
- In chapters 10-13, Paul passionately defends his authority as an apostle by reminding them of the miracles he had performed among them, his sufferings on Christ's behalf, and his humility in serving them.

In the first section of this letter, Paul describes his ongoing life experience as a servant of the gospel. He has experienced suffering, weakness, and persecution, but his perspective is joyful.

1. **Read 2 Corinthians 4:16-18.** Describe the reasoning behind Paul's attitude of joy and hope.
2. **Read 2 Corinthians 5:11-21.**
 - a. How should Christian believers respond to the good news of Christ's love? (5:15)
 - b. How are believers enabled to live for God rather than live for themselves? (5:17)
 - c. What ministry has God given to each of us (5:18), and what position do we hold (5:20)?
 - d. *Personal reflection:* God has renewed our hearts, given us His Spirit, and named us as His ambassadors. Do you see your life in a different way because of this high calling?

The gospel of Jesus challenges our values. Our 21st century American secular culture values success, education, beauty, and wealth; but God values humility, service, and faithfulness. We are to be transformed by the love of God and the power of the Spirit so that we may live our lives in a way that is pleasing to God.

You are a new creation, transformed by the Spirit and sent out to be Christ's ambassador

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The Book of 1 Thessalonians: *Live in Hope of Jesus' Return*

The book of 1 Thessalonians is one of the earliest of the letters written by the apostle Paul. The Christian community at Thessalonica was established during Paul's second missionary journey when Paul and Silas visited the city and lived there for about a month. When Paul arrived in Thessalonica, he began teaching about Jesus in the synagogue. There were many who responded to the gospel message—some Jews and many God-fearing Greeks.

The Jews in the synagogue who were not convinced by Paul's message became intensely hostile toward him. These Jews gathered together a mob of protesters and stirred up a riot in the city—shouting that Paul had been teaching that there was another King other than Caesar. Paul and Silas had to flee from the city (Acts 17:1-9), and from that point on, there was strong opposition directed against this newly formed Christian community in Thessalonica.

Paul was concerned about his dear friends that he had left behind, but he heard from Timothy that the church was flourishing in spite of persecution. Paul's response to this good report was to write this first letter to the Thessalonians in order to encourage them and to challenge them to remain faithful.

1. **Read 1 Thessalonians 3:6-13.** *Live in love*
 - a. What do you notice about the tone of Paul's response to the news he has received? (3:6-10)
 - b. What two things does Paul pray that God will do for these suffering Christians? (vs. 12-13)
2. **Read 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12.** *Live in holiness*
 - a. These Christians in Thessalonica once lived according to the values and standards of their pagan culture. How should they now be living their lives? (4:1)
 - b. What is the will of God for our lives? (4:7) (See also 1 Thess. 3:13)
 - c. What positive attitudes and behaviors are Christians to embrace? (4:9-12)
3. **Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11.** *Live in hope of Jesus' return*
 - a. How is Jesus' return described in 4:16-17?
 - b. What will be the eternal destiny of all believers? (4:17)?
 - c. How should our hope in the future affect our life in the present? (5:8-11)

We live lives of love and holiness as we wait in hope for Jesus' return

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The Book of 2 Thessalonians

What you hope for shapes how you live

Shortly after Paul wrote his first letter to the Thessalonians, he received word that the persecution against the Thessalonian believers had intensified—but worse than that, some of Paul's enemies had sent a letter, supposedly from Paul—a forged letter—telling the Thessalonians that the Day of the Lord (the day of Jesus' return) had already come. The Christians in Thessalonica were in distress; they feared that Jesus had returned and they had been left behind. Paul wrote this second letter to the Thessalonians to calm their fears and to commend them for their continued faithfulness. Paul wrote to encourage them that there would be a future day when Jesus would return, and in that day Jesus would bring His justice to bear against their enemies.

1. Read 2 Thessalonians 1:3-10 *Our hope is a confident expectation of justice*

- a. On what basis may God's people expect eventual justice? (1:6-7)
- b. When and how will final justice be accomplished? (1:7-10)

The Thessalonians were afraid that Jesus had already returned, but Paul assured them that Jesus' coming was still future. Christ's final return will be public and obvious. History will culminate in a last wicked ruler empowered by Satan—a man who will bring violence and chaos on the world. This man is described as the “man of lawlessness.”

2. Read 2 Thessalonians 2:1-8 *Our hope is centered on Jesus' defeat of all evil*

- a. Paul assures the church that the Day of the Lord will not come until the “man of lawlessness” is revealed. What will this man of lawlessness do when he comes on the scene? (2:4)
- b. How will this lawless one be destroyed? (2:8)
- c. *Personal reflection:* The Bible's teaching about the return of Jesus was not given to us to inspire fear; rather, it was given to inspire hope and confidence. What is your reaction to this teaching? Does it make you fearful? Does it make you hopeful?

3. Read 2 Thessalonians 2:13-17 *Our hope in Jesus shapes how we live*

- a. As we wait for the return of our Lord, what is our confidence for the future? (2:13-14)
- b. As we wait for the return of our Lord, how are we to live in the present? (2:15-17)
- c. *Personal reflection:* As you consider the various fearful events that you read about in the news, how should your confidence in Christ's return calm your fears and strengthen you for the future?

What we hope for shapes how we live; center your hope in Jesus' return

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