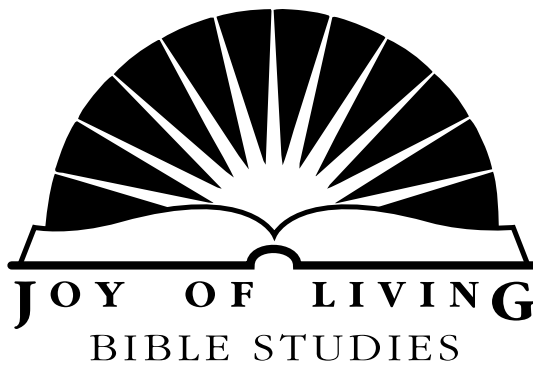


1 Corinthians

Lesson 1



Introduction

Some time ago my husband was asked to be a Friday morning chapel speaker at a Christian college in Illinois. As we were discussing this with friends they suggested that the four of us take that weekend as a little retreat from our home in Indiana and spend it in Chicago. This was late fall and we could do some Christmas shopping and perhaps take in a play. As time drew near we learned that a play depicting the story of Joseph would be staged in Chicago while we were there, so tickets were purchased and plans confirmed. The thought of checking our maps to find where in Illinois the college was located never occurred to us. Since it was in Illinois it must be near Chicago, right?

The week of the trip we checked our maps only to discover that we would have to drive the entire length of the state, a five- or six-hour trip. We were not looking forward to that drive, but knew it would be wonderful once we arrived in Chicago. However, to our surprise, we did enjoy the trip north through the state. We passed through beautiful countryside, observed many interesting things along the way, and greatly enjoyed the fellowship of our friends who had come along with us. When it was over, we all agreed we were happy we had made the trip.

As I reflected upon our study of 1 Corinthians, I was reminded of this incident. So often when we think of this book we think of the great and often-quoted chapter on love (1 Corinthians 13) and assume that we know what the entire book is about. However, we will go through the “countryside” of 12 chapters before we arrive at the one on love, as well as several chapters following. And we’ll learn many practical and workable solutions to problems that still confront the church today. It is a journey well worth the time and the effort. Just like the four of us who drove the length of Illinois to get to Chicago, we will be happy we made the trip.

Why Study the Bible?

The object of any study of the Bible is to learn more about who God is and what He is like. During this study you may wish to keep a separate list of the characteristics (attributes) of God as you discover them, along with appropriate Scripture references. This is the foundation upon which we build and grow as we mature in our relationship with God.

There are two basic rules of interpretation we need to keep in mind as we begin this study. First is to be aware of the background or the culture and customs of the people to whom the book is written; second is to keep each Scripture in the context in which it is written. When we are careful to do these things, many of the obscure or difficult passages take on a clearer meaning.

How fortunate we are to have the entire Bible available to us. We take this privilege of the written word of God far too lightly. What would happen if we had to rely solely upon what we could remember was said by our pastor or Sunday School teacher or Bible teacher in order to live the Christian life? The people to whom and about whom Paul wrote lived under exactly these circumstances. Unfortunately, many people choose to live this way today.

In 1 Peter 1:23 we are told of the importance of the Bible: “For you have been born again. Your new life did not come from your earthly parents because the life they gave you will end in death. But this new life will last forever *because it comes from the eternal, living word of God*” (NLT, italics added). No book has been more criticized than the Bible. Yet all of its critics down through the centuries have died and, for the most part, have been forgotten. The Word of God, however, is still here, and we can be assured it will stand forever.

Have you ever thought, “If only I could see the Lord Jesus with my own eyes, and touch Him, and see some miracles like those recorded in the Bible; if I could hear the voice of God for myself, then I wouldn’t have so much trouble believing.” Listen to the words of Peter in 2 Peter 1:15-18, keeping in mind that, according to verse 14, he knows he is going to die momentarily, as he reminds us of some very important things: “And I will make every effort to see that after my departure you will always be able to remember these things. We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.’ We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.”

Peter was there with the Lord Jesus Christ on the mountain—he saw with his own eyes what happened when Jesus was transfigured before him (see Matthew

17:1-13). He heard the voice of God there. He had lived in the physical presence of the Lord for over three years, felt His human body, heard His words, seen His miracles. What could be better than that? In verse 19 of 2 Peter 1, Peter tells us, “And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.”

What could be more certain than what you see, hear or feel? Peter tells us: The Word of God! Our eyes and ears and emotions can mislead us. Just try interviewing three eyewitnesses to the same accident—you will hear three different versions of what happened. But the Word of God will never mislead us—and we can hold it in our hands! What a privilege, and what an awesome responsibility!

The City of Corinth

Corinth was an important city in the ancient world, built on a steep hill overlooking the Adriatic Sea on one side and the Aegean Sea on the other. (See map on page 8.) Located about 40 miles west of Athens on a narrow isthmus between Peloponnesus and the mainland, Corinth was a great commercial center of the Roman Empire, controlling three harbors, two of great importance: Lechaem, about 2 miles west, and Cenchreae, about 6 miles to the east. In 196 B.C. Rome declared Corinth a free city. Fifty years later, in 146 B.C., Corinth rebelled against Rome and was totally destroyed by Mummius the Consul. It was rebuilt in great elegance in 46 B.C. by Julius Caesar, because he wanted Corinth to be a witness to the Greek people of their conquerors, the Romans. He also declared Corinth a Roman colony, which meant that retired Roman soldiers were stationed there, so it became a city filled with sailors and retired army veterans.

In Paul’s day Corinth was quite a city of renown. It was very old in some ways and relatively new in others. It was referred to in *The Iliad* by the poet Homer as being “wealthy Corinth.” In time the ruins of this great city were lost to history for many years, and a fishing village was built over them. The earthquake of 1928 uncovered these ruins and today much of the city has been excavated.

Corinth sat on the major trade route between Italy and Asia Minor, which brought it great commercial prosperity. The location of this city was the key to its opulence. At its peak it was a city of some 700,000 people of different backgrounds and cultures. It was the seat of the Isthmian Games, which were held every two years (this gives meaning to the illustration in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27) and were second in importance only to the Olympic games. Corinth had a huge outdoor stadium and two theaters—one outdoor, which seated 18,000 people, and one indoor, which held 3,000.

Corinth was Greek in its cultural heritage, but Roman in the way it was governed and conducted trade and commerce. The city had some of the best features of the

Roman and Greek cultures, but it also had all of the worst features of both. It was a transient population because of the eastern trade routes, a seaport, and a retirement center of Roman sailors and soldiers. History and experience tells us that when these things are present in any city it becomes morally corrupt. Consequently, Corinth became one of the vice capitals of the world.

The Corinthians worshipped many gods and goddesses, the best known being Aphrodite, the goddess of love. A thousand prostitutes served in Aphrodite’s temple. Corinth’s reputation for sexual promiscuity was so well known that a term was invented to describe it: *korinthiazomai*, “to Corinthianize,” meant “to practice sexual immorality.” If you want to know what Corinth was like, read Romans 1:18-32, for Paul wrote the book of Romans while in Corinth, and could have looked out his window and seen the very sins he was describing.

Greek life, architecture and drama were permeated with sex. Wives in the Greek culture were honored legally, but ignored socially. They had no influence in anything. It was a man’s world in the worst sense. The licentiousness and immorality—heterosexual as well as homosexual activities—led to the downgrading of women. Homosexuality had been a part of the pagan Greek life for centuries. Socrates and Plato took that kind of behavior for granted and considered it to be an accepted part of life. This type of thinking is being promoted in our day as well. Our study of this book will help us to stand firm in our faith and be the people God would have us be in our culture in a kind, loving but firm, holy, moral, and ethical way.

Problems in the Church

The book of 1 Corinthians was written by Paul, the great Apostle to the Gentiles, who next to Jesus was the mightiest force in the spreading and shaping of our Christian faith. Some of the details of his visit to Corinth around 51 A.D. are recorded in Acts 18. In verse 2 of this chapter we learn that Paul met two fellow Jews there, Aquila and his wife, Priscilla, whose names are often referred to in his letters. Apparently they were already believers, or Luke (the author of Acts) probably would have mentioned the fact that Paul had introduced them to the Lord.

Aquila was born in Pontus (a province northeast of Galatia). Later he lived in Italy, but had recently left Italy because the Emperor Claudius had ordered all Jews out of Rome. Suetonius, a Roman historian who wrote about 100 A.D., states that this decree was made because the Jews in Rome were constantly in tumult at the instigation of one Chrestus, “apparently a reference to Christos or Christ.”¹¹

Paul supported himself while in Corinth by working with Aquila and Priscilla, who were fellow tentmakers and had opened their home to Paul. He stayed with them, disciplined them, and preached in the synagogue every Sabbath, trying to persuade the Jews to accept Christ as their promised Messiah.

When his preaching in the synagogue was rejected by the Jews, Paul turned to the Gentiles. He taught in the home of a godly man named Justus, who lived next door to the synagogue (see Acts 18:4-7). Many did believe, including Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, and his family (see Acts 18:8). Paul, however, became discouraged there, perhaps because of his great love for his people, the Jews, and their antagonism toward the Gospel. God gave him an encouraging vision of the Lord Jesus, who assured him that “many people” would yet come to Christ through his testimony (see Acts 18:9-11). This strengthened Paul’s faith tremendously and he stayed in Corinth another year and a half.

Finally the Jews rose up against Paul and forcefully brought him before the Roman Proconsul Gallio (see Acts 18:12-18). Gallio was too wise to be deceived by the charges of the Jews. He immediately saw that their accusations against Paul were associated with their own laws and customs rather than Roman law, which he was to uphold, so he refused to hear their case at all.

Sosthenes had become the leader of the synagogue after Crispus was converted to Christianity. This same mob, which had brought Paul before Gallio, turned on Sosthenes and beat him. If this is the same Sosthenes mentioned in 1 Corinthians 1:1 (many scholars agree that he is), the beating worked together for good in his life (see Romans 8:28), for he later became a Christian himself and was a great help to Paul.

Paul stayed at Corinth “for some time” (see Acts 18:18), seeing many people come to the Lord, begin to grow in their faith, and establish the Corinthian church. Paul later departed by boat for Syria, taking with him his good friends, Aquila and Priscilla. Reading about how Paul spent this time leading people to Christ and discipling them makes me wonder: Are we willing to do the same?

The Same Problems in Churches Today

What happened in the church at Corinth that brought about the need for Paul to write them this letter? The same things that can happen today in our individual lives or within a local church. We lose our focus upon the Lord Jesus Christ and become preoccupied with people and knowledge, spiritual gifts, etc. Soon human intellect is substituted for God’s wisdom and Christians take on the morality and customs of the culture in which they live, resulting in permissive living and a powerless church. The book of 1 Corinthians is filled with strong rebukes and we must take its message to heart for we, too, are members of a godless society desperately in need of the mind-transforming, life-changing message of Jesus Christ.

Word reached Paul of problems in the church. He wrote a letter in response to this news, which we do not have (see 1 Corinthians 5:9). This letter must not have accomplished much because further word came from Chloe that serious problems were growing within the

church (see 1 Corinthians 1:11). Then, according to 1 Corinthians 7:1 and 16:17-18, a delegation of three men was sent to Paul with a letter containing questions about many issues confronting their congregation. This gave God the opportunity to use Paul to address those issues, as well as other problems, through the principles taught in this book.

Some of the problems discussed in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians are:

1. Personality cults resulting from allegiance to strong Christian leaders.
2. Secular knowledge vs. spiritual wisdom.
3. Church discipline of those who commit sexual sins.
4. Believers taking legal action against fellow believers in civil court.
5. Marriage, celibacy, divorce and remarriage.
6. Should Christians eat meat offered to idols?
7. Spiritual gifts and how they are to be used within the church to build up one another.
8. Is the physical, bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ important, and if so, does it have any application to the Christian?

Do you believe most of these problems exist today in the church? Do you see any application for your own life? If Paul were writing this today to your local church, this would still be God’s message, for God never changes; His Word remains the same regardless of the culture or society. This is a wonderfully up-to-date, practical letter governing personal matters and corporate church matters. Remember the words of Jesus in Matthew 24:35: “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.”

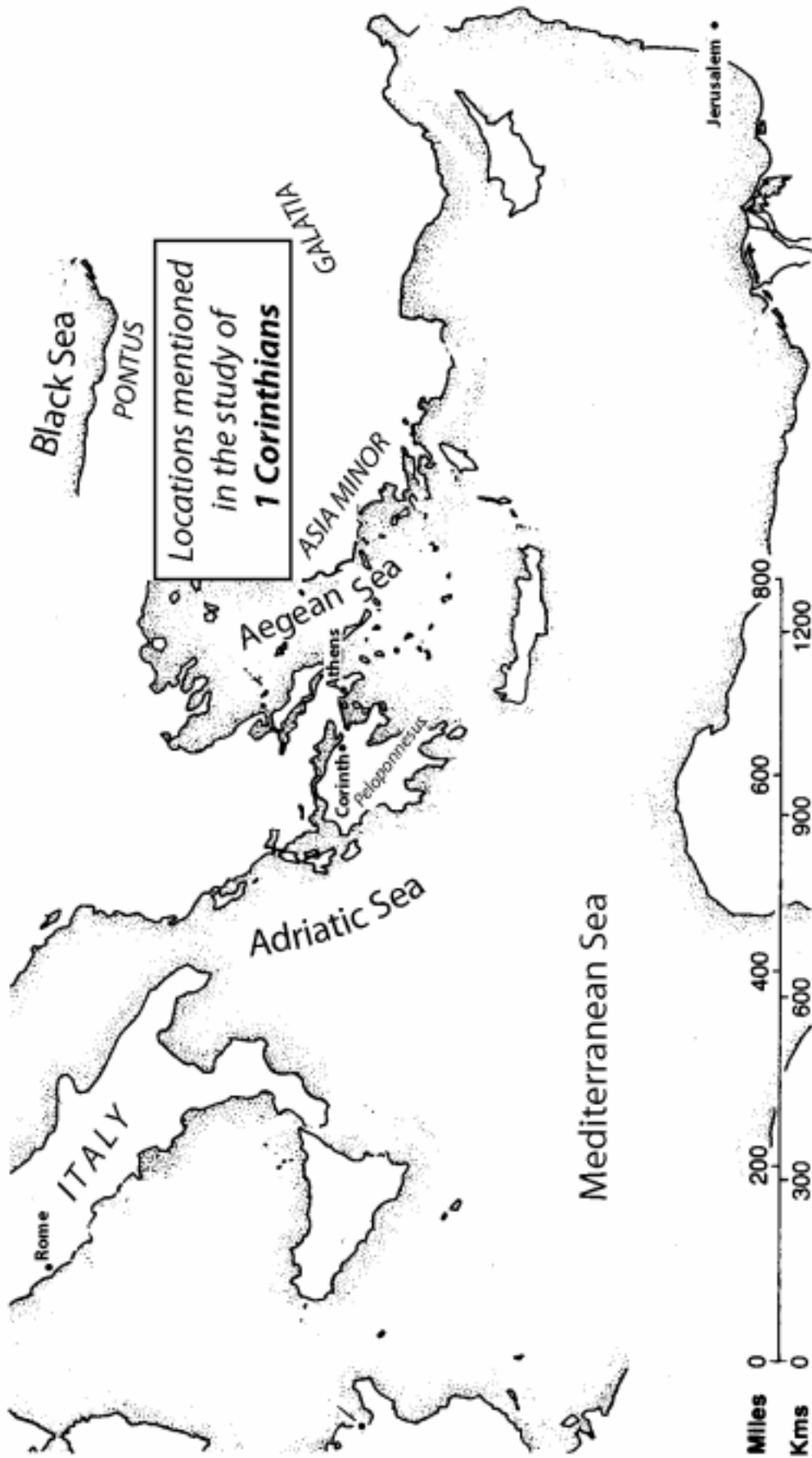
Applying God’s Word to Our Lives

It is important to remember that knowledge without application tends to produce pride and falls far short of God’s purpose in giving us His Word. Real growth and maturity comes when our knowledge is applied inwardly, which changes our attitudes. Changed attitudes inevitably produce changed lives. Our purpose in this study will be to bring the principles taught into our everyday lives and allow God’s Holy Spirit to change us and use us for God’s great glory and the expansion of His Kingdom.

Think about your life now. Does it reflect the character of God? Are you satisfied with your life? Do you have a desire to learn new spiritual truths? What do you need to do to prepare your heart for this study? Are there any preconceived ideas or hindrances that you need to talk to God about? Based upon your present knowledge of the Apostle Paul, the human author of this letter, what is your overall impression of him and why do you feel this way? Pray and ask God to give you special insights into His Word through this study. He will do it!

Notes

1. G. Coleman Luck, *First Corinthians* (Chicago, Illinois: Moody Press, 1958)



Study Questions

Before you begin each day:

- a. Pray and ask God to speak to you through His Holy Spirit.
- b. Use only the Bible for your answers.
- c. Write your answers and the verses you used.
- d. Challenge questions are for those who have the time and wish to do them.
- e. Personal questions are to be shared with the class only if you wish to share them.
- f. If you wish, insert your name in the assigned verses to make them more personal.

First Day: Read the Introduction to 1 Corinthians.

1. What helpful or new thought did you find in the Introduction to 1 Corinthians or from your teacher's lecture? What personal application did you choose to apply to your life?

2. The suggested memory verse is John 3:16, or you may choose another verse that was meaningful to you. Share your memory verse with your discussion group or with someone else to encourage them.

Second Day: Read 1 Corinthians 1, concentrating on verses 1-3.

1. Paul, the author of 1 Corinthians, tells about himself in Acts 26:4-18. Summarize what you learn about him from these verses.

2. In 1 Corinthians 1:1 Paul says he is "called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus." Look up the word "apostle" in a dictionary.

3. In 1 Corinthians 1:2 Paul addresses his letter to "those sanctified in Christ Jesus." Look up "sanctified" in the dictionary.

4. a. Paul mentions God's grace and peace in 1 Corinthians 1:3. Look up "grace" in the dictionary.

b. How do we receive God's grace according to Ephesians 2:8-9?

c. How do we have peace with God according to Romans 5:1?

5. Personal: Have you received God's grace and peace through faith in Jesus? Why not pray now and ask Him for this wonderful gift?

Third Day: Review 1 Corinthians 1, concentrating on verses 4-9.

1. a. It was Paul's custom to begin his letters by thanking God for the best traits of his readers. What are the things about the church in Corinth for which Paul is thankful? (1 Corinthians 1:4-7)

- b. Personal: Do you thank God for your fellow Christians? Have you personally shared your praise and affirmation of a fellow believer, perhaps face to face, by phone or by mail? God wants us to encourage each other in this way. Write a note of reminder to yourself here: Who will you contact and what will you say?
2. Challenge: How many times does Paul mention Christ in the 1 Corinthians 1:1-9? Do you think this is the focus of Paul's message? Why or why not?
3. How has God shown His grace to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 1:8?
4. How is the day of the Lord, when Christ will return in glory and establish His kingdom, described in 2 Peter 3:10,13?
5. According to 1 Corinthians 1:9, to what has God called us? What does this mean to you?
6. a. Challenge: God's faithfulness is also mentioned in 1 Corinthians 1:9. What do these verses say about that?
Deuteronomy 7:9
- 1 Corinthians 10:13
- 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24
- 1 John 1:9
- b. Personal: How has God been faithful to you in the past? What difficult situation, temptation, or trial are you facing right now? Write a prayer here to God about it, and thank Him that He is faithful and will provide a way through it for you.

Fourth Day: Review 1 Corinthians 1, concentrating on verses 10-16.

1. What does Paul ask of the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 1:10?
2. What problem does Paul address in 1 Corinthians 1:11-13?
3. a. What do you learn about Apollos in Acts 18:24-28? Summarize briefly.
- b. What do you learn about Cephas in John 1:40-42?

4. Challenge: Unity has always been God's way. Our unity as believers is based on what we believe about Jesus Christ. What do these verses say about unity? What does this mean to you?

John 17:20-21

Romans 15:5-7

Philippians 2:1-2

5. Personal: Have you allowed yourself to be divided from other believers by non-essential differences of opinion? Ask God to help you set these matters aside so that you can be one with them in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Fifth Day: Review 1 Corinthians 1, concentrating on verses 17-25.

1. According to 1 Corinthians 1:17, what was Paul's goal?

2. a. What does Paul say about the message of the cross in 1 Corinthians 1:18?

b. What is the message of the cross as defined by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4?

c. Challenge: Why do you think this message is foolish to those who do not believe?

3. a. Paul quotes from Isaiah 29:14 in 1 Corinthians 1:19. Read Isaiah 29:13-14. How does God say people try to stand before Him based on their own human wisdom?

b. According to Proverbs 9:10 where does godly wisdom begin?

4. a. In 1 Corinthians 1:20-21, how does Paul characterize the wisdom of this world? Through what are we able to be saved?

b. Challenge: Read Romans 1:16-17. Although the world thinks the gospel is foolish, why is Paul not ashamed of it?

5. a. According to 1 Corinthians 1:22-23, what do some people look for in their religion, and how do they react to the message of Christ?

- b. What is Christ to those whom God has called? (1 Corinthians 1:24)
 - c. What is Paul's final comparison of God and man in 1 Corinthians 1:25?
6. Personal: Are you ever tempted to share words of human wisdom with others rather than focusing on the powerful message of Jesus' death on the cross for our salvation? It is easy to fear being rejected as foolish. Pray that God will take away your fear and prepare the hearts of those you will be sharing with. Who is He calling you to speak to about Jesus?

Sixth Day: Review 1 Corinthians 1, concentrating on verses 26-31.

1. Personal: As Paul suggests in 1 Corinthians 1:26, think about when you were called to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. When did this occur? Were you wise by human standards then? Influential? From an important family? Can you boast about any of these things?
2. a. According to 1 Corinthians 1:27-29, how did God choose to do His work in the world, and why did He do this?
- b. Read Jeremiah 9:23-24. List the things in which we are not to boast and the things we are.
3. Personal: Can you say that you know God? If not, you can by simply doing what Jesus said in John 1:12 and Romans 10:9-10. You may want to use the following prayer: "Lord Jesus, I need you. Thank you for dying on the cross for my sins. I open the door of my life and receive you as my Savior and my Lord. Thank you for forgiving my sins and giving me eternal life. Take control of my life and make me the kind of person you want me to be. Amen."
4. In 1 Corinthians 1:30 Paul mentions four things Christ has become for the Christian. What is the meaning of each word according to the dictionary?
- wisdom
- righteousness
- holiness
- redemption
5. Challenge: Why should this teaching about Christ keep us from boasting about ourselves? (Refer to your answer to question 1.)
6. Pray with and for the members of your discussion group. Thank God for the things you are learning about Him through studying His Word. You may wish to record prayer requests, answers to prayer, and praise in a separate prayer notebook.