

Isa. 64:1–9
Ps. 80:1–7, 17–19
1 Cor. 1:3–9
Mark 13:24–37

In and through Grace

Goal for the Session *Anticipating God’s return, adults will seek ways to encourage others and find strength for themselves through the church.*

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on 1 Corinthians 1:3–9

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” E. Elizabeth Johnson

The letter’s thanksgiving (1:4–9) telegraphs to readers at the outset the basic concerns of the writer. In this case, Paul’s concerns are several related issues pertaining to the welfare of the house churches in Corinth: their charismatic giftedness (vv. 4, 7), their wealth—particularly but not only in terms of speech and knowledge (v. 5), the revelation of Christ in glory on the Day of the Lord (vv. 7, 8), and the faithfulness of the God who has called them (v. 9). Each of these subjects recurs throughout 1 Corinthians.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Carlos F. Cardoza-Orandi

This text points to one of the unique characteristics of the Christian religion: the intimate relationship between God and the Christian community that God bestows in and through Jesus Christ. Christianity gives witness to an intimate relationship among God, creation, and, in particular, the Christian community. This relationship is contextual: in other words, it takes its life and its shape from the particular terms of people’s cultures. Hence, Jesus is our brother, our Lord, our ancestor, our beloved one, our enlightened spirit. Paul reasserts that the Christian community will be sustained in this spiritual continuum for one crucial reason: “God is faithful” (v. 9).

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Martin B. Copenhaver

Paul proceeds to bless the Corinthian congregation. He has some urgent matters to take up with them, but those can wait for a time. Instead, Paul begins by offering a gift of blessing. It is an offering that, in itself, reminds his readers of the bonds they share. This passage invites us to offer thanks to God, not for material gifts, but for spiritual gifts found in the church. It might also serve as a reminder that the gathered body, the body of Christ, is itself intended to be a feast of abundance laid out for the sake of the world.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Charles L. Campbell

The grace of Jesus Christ, which is the source of the community’s faith and life, undercuts all divisions in the community based on human accomplishments or status. Grace here has radical social implications; it is not simply a word spoken to individuals or a power at work in individuals. Grace creates a new kind of community. Paul invites the Corinthian church—and the contemporary church—to become an odd, new people in the context of a culture divided between superior and inferior, honored and shamed, insider and outsider. The grace of Jesus Christ is the source of that new kind of community.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE
1 Corinthians 1:3–9

Focus on Your Teaching

The seasons of Advent and Christmas cause anxiety among many Christians who have unrealistic expectations for the season. Others may be facing a holiday without a family member or dear friend. However, Advent can be a time to slow down and anticipate God coming to earth. The text for the First Sunday of Advent is Paul's opening blessing and thanksgiving to the church at Corinth. That early Christian community, like Bethlehem where Jesus was born and perhaps our own, was filled with conflict. Offering a word of hope and affirmation can put lives in perspective.

God of grace and peace, may your light shine through me as I lead this group in the study of your holy Word. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- Bibles
- Advent wreath with four purple or blue candles
- matches
- pens and paper
- board or newsprint
- markers
- copies of Resource Sheets 1, 2
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for the next session

For Responding

- option 1: writing paper, pens
- option 2: guest with knowledge of congregation's history
- option 3: copies of Resource Sheet 1

The Revised Common Lectionary has a three-year cycle. Each year begins on the First Sunday of Advent and highlights one of the first three Gospels. Today begins a new year with the focus on the Gospel of Mark.

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, arrange the Advent wreath and candles in the center of your learning space. If possible, use the same color of candles that your church uses in Advent worship.

Greet participants as they arrive and introduce any newcomers to at least one regular participant. Ask that person to orient the newcomer on how the group functions. Invite participants to call out the things they need to do to prepare for Christmas. When someone mentions Advent devotions or something similar, recall that, for Christians, the time leading to Christmas is Advent, a time of waiting and preparation of the way of the Lord. Ask:

✠ What spiritual practices help you get ready for Christmas?

If your congregation provides any Advent resources, tell the group about them or have the resources available for them. Direct the group's attention to the Advent wreath and light one candle. Pray this prayer or one of your choosing:

*O God, you are the light of the world. Today we light the candle of hope.
May hope light the path we walk until you come again. Amen.*

EXPLORING

Remind participants that this is a Bible study based on the readings used in worship each week, called the Revised Common Lectionary. Many denominations around the world use these same texts, which are based on a three-year cycle. Each cycle begins with the First Sunday of Advent. Before beginning this new year, which focuses on the Gospel of Mark, review some of the themes and main ideas from Matthew.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (Important Lessons from Matthew) and pens and paper. Work in groups of two to four persons. Suggest that participants allow some time for personal reflection on the final questions on the sheet.

Periodically taking time to review recent lessons helps everyone make connections and draw general directions from the focus scriptures for living faithfully.

Option: After a few minutes, gather as a group and ask adults who participated in the fall session to tell briefly about one behavior they have changed or begun as a result of the study.

Ask adults to turn to 1 Corinthians 1:3–9 in their Bibles and read it silently. Make two columns on board or newsprint: God and Corinthian Church. Ask:

✻ What did you learn about God from this text? What did you discover about the church in Corinth from this text?

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on 1 Corinthians 1:3–9). Allow a few minutes for everyone to read it. Invite them to add other information about God and the Corinthian church to the newsprint.

Explain that all of Paul’s letters in the Bible that are addressed to Christian communities seem to be for communities that are embroiled in controversy and division. Ask:

✻ What do we know or surmise about the conflicts in Corinth from Paul’s greetings to them?

Direct their attention to the “So What?” excerpt. Invite someone to read it aloud. Then read aloud this excerpt from the longer essay by the same writer:

[Paul] knows that he has difficult issues to take up with the Corinthians, so he chooses to begin by reminding them of the basis of their being together in the first place—because they are called by Jesus Christ and enlivened by the presence of the Holy Spirit. He sets their sights on higher places so that they might begin to stop wallowing in the petty particulars of their present circumstances. Paul is reminding them of the very height and depth and breadth of their call . . .

—Excerpted from Martin B. Copenhaver, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 1* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 16.

Ask the following questions:

✻ What reactions might the Corinthian church have had to Paul’s blessing and thanksgiving?

✻ How might these words have encouraged them and given them strength?

These questions will prepare the group for the Responding options.

Extinguish the candle.

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities, depending on the length of your session:

- 1. Write a Letter** Distribute paper and pens. Invite participants to spend a few moments thinking about a Christian community they know of that is in conflict. Have them list some of the issues of the conflict. Remind them that while individuals may commit the offenses, they are to name the issues and not individuals. Then have them list some of the gifts that community has to be thankful for. Now they are to spend a few minutes writing an opening paragraph to the community that does not address the issues, but rather gives thanks for their particular gifts.

EASY
PREP

After a few minutes, invite a few volunteers to read their paragraphs aloud to the entire group. Ask the group members to name where they hear grace in the paragraph.

- 2. Your Church Community** Invite the pastor or someone knowledgeable about the history of your congregation to talk with your group about how the church got started and about some of the early conflicts. Talk with the person(s) about the lesson. Ask him or her to refrain from using names and individual personalities but rather, like Paul, lift up the issues and how they were resolved.

After the presentation, invite participants to name, again without using people's names, some issues in your church that need to be addressed. Then ask:

- ✎ How might Paul write the opening portion of a letter to our congregation today?
- ✎ What would he be thankful for?

- 3. An Odd Community** Have participants read the “Now What?” excerpt on Resource Sheet 1. Form groups of two or three to discuss these questions:

- ✎ How does our community break down social divisions between members?
- ✎ In what ways would an outsider find our community odd in the way Paul encourages?

Reunite and invite groups to compare their answers.

CLOSING

Gather around the Advent wreath and light one candle, if necessary. Read aloud:

Grace creates a new kind of community—one in which the divisions and hierarchies of the world no longer function because the grace of Jesus Christ, not human accomplishment or status, is the source of the community's life. There is no room here for superior and inferior, because all gifts have the same source and are consequently equally valued.

—Excerpted from Charles L. Campbell, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 1* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 19.

Invite the participants to think about one way they can contribute to this new kind of community, encouraging others and finding strength for themselves.

Close with this prayer or one of your choosing:

God of hope, thank you for encouragement and vision for us to be the community you know we can be. We will imitate your way of grace this week and always, breaking barriers and hierarchies of the world that should not be. Amen.

Extinguish the candle. Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for the next session, or e-mail it to learners during the week. Encourage them to read the focus scripture and the resource sheet before the next session.

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Important Lessons from Matthew

On eleven of the past twelve weeks important texts from Matthew were the focus. Recall the texts from the chart below. Add your notes about what you remember. Add helpful comments by group members during the discussion later.

Text	Major Lesson	Your Comments
Matthew 18:15–20	What to do when someone offends you	
Matthew 18:21–35	Forgiving is not an option for Christians.	
Matthew 20:1–16	God loves all equally.	
Matthew 21:23–32	Qualities of a good religious leader	
Matthew 21:33–46	God uses people who bear fruit.	
Matthew 22:1–14	All are invited to the banquet, but wear the right clothes!	
Matthew 22:34–46	The greatest commandments	
Matthew 23:1–12	The greatest among you will be your servant.	
Matthew 25:1–13	Ten bridesmaids, keep oil in your lamp.	
Matthew 25:14–30	Use your gifts and be willing to risk.	
Matthew 25:31–46	Serve the least of these and you serve Jesus.	

Personal Reflection Questions

1. Which two lessons are most important to you now?
2. What are one or two acts of discipleship that you have implemented since studying these passages?