

## Bible Study Guide

St Phil's Anglican Church Eastwood

# How to do church

— The Book of 1 Corinthians —



image: freepik.com

*"The body is a unit" 1 Corinthians 12:12*

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## An Introduction to 1 Corinthians – The church and the culture

Welcome to Corinth – the city by the sea! Corinth is a beautiful place, set on the 6-kilometre Isthmus between the Peloponnese and the Mainland. It commercially controls the traffic between Italy and Asia.

In the golden years of Athens, around 500BC, the city of Corinth flourished. But in 146BC, Corinth came into conflict with the superpower of Rome. For 100 years it lay in ruins.

Julius Caesar was the visionary who, in 44BC, re-founded the great city as a Roman colony. Again it became a strategic centre for commerce and trade and gave Rome control over both main harbours as trade routes. However, the city was largely established by freed men, previously slaves, and was a great way to get rid of troublemakers – an idea taken up by the British colony upon the founding of Australia!

The city was immediately prosperous, since money attracts people like flies on dead meat! People flooded in from East and West, and along with this rapid economic growth, Corinth attracted all the troubles associated with fast population growth.

The Romans dominated Corinth. They brought in their laws and culture and religions, but Corinth still kept many of its Greek foundations – religion, philosophy and the arts. From the East came Egyptian and Asian beliefs, along with this strange group called the Jews, who had a belief in only one single God.

Corinth was not only a wealthy city, but a city still haunted by its old reputation: a city full of sex! Hence the phrase “to act like a Corinthian” was coined. On one wall of art, was a clay picture of human genitals offered to the god for the healing of that part of the body ravaged by venereal disease. This abundant sexual activity was to be expected from a city built around a seaport.

Religions were vast. There were at least 26 sacred places and temples dedicated to the Pantheon (or many gods). Corinth was the equivalent of today’s New York, Los Angeles and Las Vegas all rolled into one.

Unfortunately, the Christian church of Corinth, in many ways, was like the society of Corinth. It was a mix of Jews, Greeks, slaves and freemen. Some were very well off, but many were poor slaves. Most were from a Gentile background.

So here was a church dominated by poor Gentiles, with perhaps two or three wealthy families, with diverse beliefs and backgrounds. This diversity brought many issues to the church that required radical action.

- men were committing adultery with their stepmother
- church members were taking one another to court
- there were splits in their community even during the Lord’s Supper
- and there was chaos in their church meetings

Paul had brought the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ to this church only 3 years earlier, and so when he heard of these problems and many more, he wrote a letter, which we now know as “The first letter to the Corinthians”.

# Study One: “Leaders and Losers”

**Opening discussion:** Where do you see your place in the church of God?

## READ 1 Corinthians 3:1-23

*Paul addresses the Corinthians as “the temple of God”. Built by God. God’s fellow workers. God’s building.*

*There seem to be some disagreements and arguments between the people in the church. What do you think is at the centre of these problems?*

*What foundations are laid in your church? By whom? Are people wrongly given the credit for growing the seeds of the gospel?!*

### Investigating the text

1. Consider the place of wisdom from these references in the Bible:

Psalm 19:7 \_\_\_\_\_

Daniel 12:1-3 \_\_\_\_\_

Matthew 11:25 \_\_\_\_\_

2. Do you think it is easy or difficult to understand the message of salvation? Why?

\_\_\_\_\_

3. Compare these passages – what do they say about growing up as Christians?

1 Corinthians 3:1-3 \_\_\_\_\_

1 Peter 2:1-3 \_\_\_\_\_

Ephesians 4:11-13 \_\_\_\_\_

4. 1 Corinthians 3:6-9 ... who does the work of God? What is our place? What words would you use to describe your job as a Christian sharing the news of Jesus with other people?

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\_\_\_\_\_

5. 1 Corinthians 3:16-17 – as a Christian, as a member of God’s church, what do these verses tell us about our identity...

a. As an individual?

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b. As part of a body?

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6. In what ways do you take part in the life of your church as an individual?

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7. In what ways do you take part in the life of your church as a member of a body?

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8. What is the best part of being a part of your church family?

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### **Investigating our lives**

There are many times we need to be reminded about our place in God’s church as part of the larger body of Christ. It is often in the midst of arguments, that we see how complex and difficult it is to be a part of a larger body. But Paul wants to remind us in Corinthians that it is important. So how do we keep the idea of “the body” as a central part of our faith?

- Ways I am encouraged by my church family
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- Things that cause arguments among my Church family
- 

- Ways that I can help when there is conflict between me and another person or group
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## Study Two: “Married or Single”

**Opening discussion:** What do you think society today thinks about married and single life?

### READ 1 Corinthians 7:1-40

#### Investigating the text

1. Look at these passages and consider God’s teaching on marriage in the Bible.

Malachi 2:16

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1 Timothy 5:14

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Hebrews 13:4

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2. Paul seems to encourage marriage of widows in 1 Timothy 5, but discourage it in 1 Corinthians 7:40. He often has different opinions on these issues because he is writing to different churches at different times. So Paul has some knowledge of the issues facing the churches he is writing to. Look closely at verse 1-8 – what possible issues in Corinth do you see just in these verses?
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3. In verses 17-24, Paul speaks about circumcision. He uses similar arguments as to marriage. “Stay as you are!” Whatever the current circumstances, Paul seems to want people not to worry about these issues. Instead, he encourages them to think about the big picture. Read verse 29-31 again. What is Paul saying to them in these verses?
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4. What do verses 17-24 say to you? What are your concerns at the moment? Are there more important things you need to consider regarding your faith? Marriage and singleness are certainly big things to think about. But are there more important things you may be forgetting to think about?
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5. Make a list of 3 of the most important **things** (not people) in your life right now. Write next to them how much time you've spent in the last week or two thinking about each thing – or seriously considering that part of your life. What do you need to spend more time considering? Less time?

a. \_\_\_\_\_

b. \_\_\_\_\_

c. \_\_\_\_\_

6. Verse 32-40 give people a lot of choices. There is no “right answer” in a lot of matters like this. Although it is often up to our conscience, Paul really wants people to consider their decisions in the light of the Kingdom of God and the return of King Jesus.

When you make decisions, do you consider the big things in life in light of the return of Jesus and what that means for the world? Write down how God's kingdom has influenced the last 3 big decisions you've had to make in the past year or two.

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### Investigating our lives

What big decisions are coming up for you? How will you decide? Write down three questions to ask yourself next time you have to make a big decision – questions that will help you be influenced by God's kingdom. For example: “How will this decision affect the way I devote my **time** to God and his people?”

a. \_\_\_\_\_

b. \_\_\_\_\_

c. \_\_\_\_\_

## Study Three: “Weak and Strong”

**Opening discussion:** What cultural aspects of Christian life do you struggle with (or *did* you struggle with)?

### READ 1 Corinthians 8:1-13

*Paul is addressing yet another issue among the Corinthian Church members. There are many different religious backgrounds among the Christians and this is causing some issues with those who are new to the faith. Paul wants people to see each other’s weaknesses – to see through each other’s eyes – so they can understand each other better in their faith. This often has some difficult applications in our life together.*

### Investigating the text

1. Look at these examples of idol worship in the Bible. What does God think of other “gods”?

Exodus 32:1-10

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Judges 2:10-15

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2. Read the following accounts in Acts. What sort of environment was it for Christians? With many other gods being worshipped, what would it be like for someone to become a Christian from this culture?

Acts 19:23-29

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Acts 17:16-24

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3. Consider your own religious background, or the background of a friend. What understanding of other “gods” did you or they grow up with? What impact does that background have on someone joining the Christian faith? For example: if you were brought up believing there are many “gods”, or that worshipping the dead is right, or praying to other people is good, how would that affect your faith today?

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4. Think of some of the food based stumbling blocks for Christians today, depending on what their background may be – for example:



- a. Eating food sacrificed to idols (often in many public restaurants there are shrines and offerings to other gods)
- b. Drinking alcohol amongst people who are recovering alcoholics
- c. Eating of non-kosher food among those who have a Jewish upbringing, eating of beef among those from a Hindu background, Eating of non-halal food among those from a Muslim background.

How should we consider the religious backgrounds of others when eating or drinking together? Can you see the world through their eyes and imagine what you think it would be like, for example, to be a recovering alcoholic attending a function with alcohol, or being from a Hindu background and being offered only beef to eat. What would it be like? How can you help people, especially those new to the Christian faith, to feel comfortable in Christian fellowship under these circumstances?

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5. Think carefully – are there things that make you uncomfortable in your faith when you meet with other Christians? For example: the way people dress when they come to church; the way some people ignore traditions; loud music; praying styles... etc. Sometimes there are things that make us uncomfortable, but may not be “wrong”. How can you deal with these things in a church community?
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6. Do you think there may be things you do as a Christian that make other Christians uncomfortable? Or, more importantly, things you do that may be unhelpful for their faith?
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### **Investigating our lives**

Paul again reinforces that we are part of a community in Christ Jesus. And it’s often difficult to remember that all the time and consider the needs of others before ourselves. So how can we help others in the way we live as Christians?

- Something I do that may be unhelpful for the faith of others – and what I can do to change that.
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- Something other people do that I find unhelpful for my faith – but isn’t really “wrong”.
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- Am I able to look at our church through the eyes of a newcomer, or a new Christian, considering their background, culture, religious background, etc?
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## Study Four: “Idols and Freedoms”

**Opening discussion:** What is Christian freedom?

### Investigating the text

1. First of all, read the background passages for 1 Corinthians 10:

Exodus 32:1-6 (the golden calf incident)

Numbers 25:1-9

Exodus 17:1-7

Numbers 16:28-35

### Now READ 1 Corinthians 10:1-11:1

2. Why do you think Paul reminds the Corinthians of all of these past events in the history of Israel? (See 1 Corinthians 10:11-12)

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3. Read verse 13 again
  - a. What comfort do you take from this verse?
  - b. What experiences have you had that testify to God’s faithfulness regarding this verse?

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4. Remember the diverse background of the new believers in Corinth. Consider their religious background and different faiths – all the different gods many of them used to worship. In verse 14-22, Paul is saying that they cannot drink the cup of Jesus (as in the Lord’s Supper) as well as drink

from the cups of demons (pagan gods). It seems like an obvious thing perhaps. So why is Paul saying it?

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5. In verse 23-33, what is the principal that Paul is sharing with us? What is the reason for not eating sacrificed food, even though there is nothing really wrong with it?
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6. Have you ever been offended by the way a Christian acted? Have you ever exercised your Christian freedom in a way that may have been hurtful to other people? Consider at this point people who may find some things that you do offensive, even though they are not considered “wrong” or offensive to you.
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7. Again, Paul says “Follow my example”. To what extent could **you** say that to others?
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### **Investigating our lives**

The theme of our freedom and the way it impacts the body of Christ is very strong throughout Corinthians, due to the nature of the problems in that church.

- Do you see similar possible problems in your church to the problems in the Corinthians church?
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- Ways I will NOT exercise my freedom in order to help others in their faith...
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## Study Five: “Traditions and abuses”

**Opening discussion:** Which traditions of the church do you, or did you, find difficult to understand?

### READ 1 Corinthians 11:2-34

*This passage has caused much contention in the church throughout history. There is great debate over what Paul’s directions to men and women are. Some believe Paul is sexist, a misogynist or purely patriarchal. However, there are many misunderstandings. So it is important as we study this passage to have big ears and small mouths as we hear each other. Consider the context of the passage – the cultural setting at the time and the audience to whom Paul is writing. Most of all, consider his reasons for saying these things – the **principals** he is teaching.*

### Investigating the text

1. Read these passages that talk about the relationship between man and woman **under God**.

Genesis 1:27

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Genesis 3:16 (as you read this, remember, the harsh “ruling” of the husband is part of the “curse” – not the way God wants it to be or the way it should be in a marriage which is under God’s rule!)

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Ephesians 1:22-23

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2. There were issues of order in worship in the Corinthian church. Some of this involved the way husbands and wives behaved in worship. (I take it that the words describing “man and woman” in this passage are primarily about “husband and wife” – the Greek words used for man and woman can mean either).

The role of the husband that Paul is talking about must be read in conjunction with ALL of his teaching on this matter. For example, that the husband is to lay down his life for his wife, as Christ laid down his life for his church. It is only when the whole teaching is taken into account that we can get a fuller understanding of this chapter.

It is impossible to give this passage thorough theological attention in a study group setting, as much reading, research and discussion is required. Instead, discuss what questions you have for this section. Follow up these questions after further study and research.

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3. The rest of this passage sheds more light on the husband/wife issue. Verses 17-34 unfold a scandalous approach to the Lord’s Supper by the Corinthians. What problems does Paul see?
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4. How do you see these sorts of problems possibly emerging in your church? In other churches?

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5. What does sharing in the Lord's Supper mean to you personally?

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6. How do you prepare yourself for coming to the Lord's Supper? What do you believe you should be doing at that meal?

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7. How do you think Paul's teaching on the Lord's Supper relate to the earlier issue of husbands and wives?

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### **Investigating our lives**

This chapter focuses on our time together in worship. As we come together on a Sunday, there are many things to think about, people to see, work to do, songs to sing. But what does it mean for you?

- The things I look forward to most about worship

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- The things I sometimes struggle with in worship

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- My most memorable worship experience (not necessarily a Sunday!)

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## Study Six: “Order and Chaos”

**Opening discussion:** What is the best gift you’ve ever received? What made it good?

### READ 1 Corinthians 14:1-25

*This passage gives another glimpse behind the scenes of the sorts of issues that are going on in the church in Corinth. They may be similar or different to issues you have faced in your church experiences. But what is helpful is to look behind the problem to see the principals Paul is suggesting for life together in God’s church.*

#### Investigating the text

1. How does the Bible speak about the gift of tongues and prophesy? The following verses may be of help in addressing this:

1 Corinthians 12:1, 10, 28

1 Corinthians 13:1

Acts 10:44-48

Acts 19:6

Jeremiah 19:14-15

Ezekiel 13:1-3

Joel 2:28-29 (also in Acts 2:17-21)

Romans 12:6-8

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2. What is the main issue that Paul is addressing concerning these two gifts?

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3. What is the principal underlying Paul’s solution? Can this principal be applied in our church?

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## READ 1 Corinthians 14:26-40

We must take care to read and understand the culture and issues of the day and place. It may be helpful to re-familiarise ourselves with the background of Corinth at this time. See the introductory notes to these studies, or find another reliable resource or commentary on this. Paul Barnett has an excellent commentary on 1 Corinthians (“Focus on the Bible” series) that explains and applies the cultural situation well.

4. What activities seemed to be common in church gatherings in Corinth at the time?
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5. What are the principals Paul outlines for keeping order in a church gathering?
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6. Verses 34-36 are quite confronting. What explanations can we offer to explain these harsh words towards women? And how do we justify the fact that in most churches today, women are not “silent”?
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7. Given the priority principal of Paul’s in verse 40 – that is, order – what might we understand the issues to be which he was addressing in the Corinthian church at the time?
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## Investigating our church lives

8. What happens in a regular Sunday worship time in your congregation? Are all of these parts of the service (often called “liturgy”) helpful, or even necessary? Which parts do you love and which do you find difficult?
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9. In what ways could our services be more helpful for non-believers or enquirers? To what extent should we accommodate non-believers in a regular Sunday service? What does Paul suggest in this regard in chapter 14?
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## Study Seven: “Unity and Diversity”

**Opening discussion:** In what ways does your **congregation** show unity and diversity in Christ?

### READ 1 Corinthians 12:12-30

*Again, Paul notes the different religious backgrounds of the many people in the Corinthian Church – and we should continue to keep this in mind, don't you think? He wants us to remember that there is only one spirit of God in the church of God. All gifts come from him and are given to the people of one body – the body of Christ. So there is an implicit unity in everything we do! Do you see that unity at church? How can you help to encourage that unity?*

### Investigating the text

1. What do you learn about Spirits from these passages?

Mark 5:1-10 \_\_\_\_\_

Luke 11:24-26 \_\_\_\_\_

1 Timothy 4:1-2 \_\_\_\_\_

1 John 4:1-3 \_\_\_\_\_

2. Do you have the Spirit of God? How do you know?

\_\_\_\_\_

3. Verse 7 – Why is the Spirit given to God's people? How does that impact the church of God?

\_\_\_\_\_

4. What are the practicalities of being “one body”? What does it mean on an average Sunday? During the week? What does it mean for you when you struggle in your Christian life?

\_\_\_\_\_

5. Consider verses 22-26. What parts of the church body do you think may be considered by some as less honourable? More honourable? Why? How do we change this perception so all parts are seen as equal?

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6. Consider verses 29-30. What would you say to someone who said: "You have to speak in tongues to be a Christian."?

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7. Verse 32 – what is the most excellent way? (Hint: Chapter 13!) Why is it more excellent than the other gifts?

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8. How do you personally honour the other members of your church?

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### **Investigating our lives**

God's Spirit is with each believer. And we are all a part of his body. Where do you see your part in Christ's body?

- Sometimes I feel like a less honourable part...
- Sometimes I look down on others for their gifts... or perhaps I just think I'm better than they are...
- I spend most of my time at church thinking about my own work/gifts, not the work/gifts of others.
- As I look at the people around me here and now, I see the gifts of...
- Other...

Why?

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## Study Eight: “Dead and Alive”

**Opening discussion:** What sort of beliefs do people in our society have about the afterlife? What do they think happens when you die?

### READ 1 Corinthians 15:1-34

*As Paul begins to conclude this letter, he goes back to basics. He spends much time on the resurrection and the reason this is so important to our faith. Is there anything more important? Is there any part of our faith that does not depend upon the resurrection of Jesus? Yet, many have turned away from this simple truth. Why?*

### Investigating the text

1. Read these passages that talk about resurrection and other’s beliefs about it:

Ezekiel 37:7 \_\_\_\_\_

Matthew 22:23-33 \_\_\_\_\_

2 Timothy 2:16-18 \_\_\_\_\_

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 \_\_\_\_\_

2. Why is the resurrection so important to Christianity?

\_\_\_\_\_

3. What are the comparisons Paul makes between Adam and Jesus Christ? Why?

\_\_\_\_\_

4. Do you know of any other religions that believe in a resurrection? What are the differences between their beliefs and Christian beliefs about resurrection? For example: Can you be sure? Do they believe anyone has already been raised?

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5. What are the problems with our faith if Christ had **not** been raised from the dead?

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6. What does Jesus' resurrection mean to you personally? How does it change the way you live today?

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7. "The sting of death is sin." What does that mean? Think about this: If there was no death, would sin be a problem?

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8. But since there is death, why is sin a problem? How does Jesus solve that problem?

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### **Investigating our lives**

Reflect on the amazing fact of the resurrection. If there was no resurrection, what is your faith about?

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- A question I still have about the resurrection:

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- The most amazing life changing fact about the resurrection for me:

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- My memory verse for 1 Corinthians:

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- Discuss the big themes of 1 Corinthians. What has stayed in your mind? What has had the most impact?

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