

1 CORINTHIANS

NOT IN VAIN

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**31 UNDATED DEVOTIONS THROUGH
THE BOOK OF 1 CORINTHIANS**

The letter of 1 Corinthians sometimes comes with a bit of a reputation. It's often portrayed as if Paul were simply pulling up the church at Corinth on a whole range of different issues. And, as we'll see, there's certainly truth in the idea that they had their fair share of problems.

But what do you notice as you read these opening verses? I'm always surprised at how positive Paul is.

On one level, it begins like many of his letters: details of who it's from; a greeting; a prayer. And yet these opening words are loaded with a significance that will make increasing sense as the book unfolds.

For a start, just count the number of times Jesus' is mentioned or referred to in this passage. On my count, it averages out as more than once every verse! Straight from the off, we're being focused on Jesus. Everything is connected to him. Everything we have comes from him. There's no room for pride or independence. Now, that's quite a challenge for a self-focused culture – and the Corinthians would have certainly felt that!

And did you spot where Paul's emphasis goes in the last few verses? In verses 7–9, the lens is focused again onto Jesus' coming return (he will be 'revealed' on the 'day of our Lord Jesus Christ'). It's the first hint that the Corinthians were vastly mistaken when it came to the timeline they were living their lives by. They'd lost confidence in this future, and it meant they'd become besotted with the world around them.

Paul begins by encouraging us with these twin-themes of our identity in Christ and the reality of his return. They will run through this book like the writing in a stick of rock – and it's just what we need, because it can be so easy for our gaze to shift onto ourselves and how much we can get out of this life.

REFLECTION

How much does Jesus run through your life like the writing in a stick of rock? Does the reality of his return impact your life today? Pray that through 1 Corinthians God would be at work in your life.

As we look at our individual churches – and perhaps the wider church too – where does our confidence lie?

After yesterday's positive beginning, it quickly becomes clear that things aren't so hunky-dory in the church at Corinth. In particular, disunity seems to be prevalent (vv. 10-12). Another group of Christians, 'Chloe's household' (v. 11), have passed on that the Corinthians are quarrelling about which leader was the best.

It was normal in Greek society for visiting philosophers and speakers to pass through town. People would typically rally around their favourite, whoever they felt sounded wisest or most eloquent. But like a bad disease, this practice seems to have now spread to the church, hence Paul's appeal for unity 'in mind and thought' (v. 10).

So with a blast of rhetorical questions (v. 13), Paul highlights the foolishness of this petty factionalism. Given what we saw about our identity being in Christ (1:1-9), how can Christ be divided? Of course, no one would say that a leader is more significant than Jesus, but perhaps in practice we can sometimes act like it.

But Paul is clear he has no desire for a 'following' or a 'tribe'. He was sent by Christ to 'preach the gospel', and 'not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power' (v. 17). And here we get our first hint as to what had gone wrong in Corinth. It seems their disunity flowed from a lack of confidence in the power of the message of the cross. And so they'd started to rely on people, rather than the gospel.

REFLECTION

The Corinthians had stopped relying on the power of the gospel, and had begun to trust in the impressiveness of leaders. Pray that we wouldn't draw up battle lines over personalities and 'big names', but would find unity in 'the message of the cross'.