

Prayers

To God

Weekly theme: the grace of God

Ask the Lord to give you the faith to respond to the grace of Jesus Christ by which you are saved, and for the humility to receive it in its fulness

For myself

Lord God, Father Almighty, bless my family today. I love those you have placed close to me, Lord God, and for many, that love is a precious and wonderful thing. However, for some, it is a struggle, because our ways have long since moved in different directions. Help me, I pray, to stand above the problems and difficulties of such relationships, and, knowing my salvation, be content to love unceasingly and without seeking reward. Perfect my love by Your grace, I pray, and keep me in the narrow way of love: AMEN

For others

Pray for the growth of churches rising in emerging nations, and all they do under sometimes difficult circumstances. Pray for the growth of the church in China, in the Arab world and in South America, for example.

Meditation

Jesus, Your great love
encompasses more than we can understand:

Your work in this world
is far more extensive than we appreciate:

Your passion for detail
covers every part of creation, large and small:

Your eye for justice
penetrates every aspect of life, in every culture:

Your power to create
far exceeds the evil and destruction in our world:

Your vision for the future
is far more exciting than we can comprehend:

Your mercy towards all
will never cease, for Your capacity for love is infinite.

Jesus, Your great love
Is magnificent, glorious, unmerited, eternal, and free!

Bible Passage

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

¹ Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and Sosthenes our brother:

² to the church of God in Corinth, to those who are set apart in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all people everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours: ³ grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴ I always give thanks to God for you because of the grace of God given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵ for you have been enriched in Him in every way, in all speech and all knowledge, ⁶ and the witness about Christ has proved to be true in you. ⁷ The result is that you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly await the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁸ and He will also sustain you to the end, blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ God is faithful, through whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Review

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is one of the most famous of his letters. It was a personal letter to the Corinthian church and the wider Church (1:2) with specific instructions about the life of the church, and with detailed answers to questions put to him by the church. The highlight of the letter is undoubtedly Paul's great 'hymn of love' (1 Corinthians 13) which is regarded by some as one of the finest pieces of literature, let alone of spiritual advice, to be found in the Bible.

Some background to this letter; Paul's evangelism of Corinth in Acts 18

Paul was the first to preach the Gospel in the great port of Corinth (Acts 18:1f.) and his work there would prove to be significant. While in the city, Jesus appeared to him in a vision (Acts 18:9,10), telling him not to be afraid but to offer those who needed it his teaching and support. The record says Paul spent a '*considerable time*' in Corinth (Acts 18:18) before moving on, presumably doing just this. However trouble broke out when the local Jews tried to charge Paul with perverting the Roman laws on religion (Acts 18:12-17) but the judge appears not to have been interested in the case! So in frustration, the Jews set upon one of their own leaders, a man called 'Sosthenes'. Remarkably, and as a result of this, Sosthenes left the Jewish community and joined Paul's church to become one of Paul's loved friends, and it seems that he was with Paul some years later when this letter was written (1:1).

The first part of this letter is written in a formal style. So Paul addressed his readers as; '*the church of God in Corinth*' (1:2). In those days, every church, or gathering of God's people, was important; there were no competing Christians, and each church could be 'named' by the town, village or city in which it met. Personal letters from one such as its founder, Paul, would have been highly valued, and rightly so. But this letter is no simple letter written just to one congregation. If we read carefully, we notice that Paul not only wrote to the Corinthians, he added, '*to those who are ... called to be holy ... together with all ... who call on the name of our Lord ...*' (1:2). This letter is therefore written to all Christians, to everyone who names Christ as Lord.

Verse 2 contains some fascinating feature; Paul defines God's people as, '*called to be holy*', and as joined to '*all God's people everywhere*'. So here, right at the beginning of his letter, Paul challenges his readers in two ways; firstly to be like their Saviour, Christ, who was set apart to do God's will (this is the meaning of 'holy') 'Christ-like', and reminded them that they were not alone; God's church was made up of all who confess 'our Lord Jesus Christ'. Why did Paul write this? As we read on in 1 Corinthians we discover that the Christians at Corinth tended to reflect the society in which they lived rather than strived to 'be holy', and they did what they wanted rather than accept their part in God's Church. Most of this letter is about challenging these faults.

Verse 3 contains Paul's famous greeting 'grace ... and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ' found in his other letters (Romans 1:7, Galatians 1:3, Philippians 1:2 etc.) Such words are not merely warm words of greeting; they are but a powerful comment on the work of God amongst His people. 'Peace' comes from the Jewish greeting 'shalom', which means many things including good health and well being. 'Grace'

comes from the standard Greek greeting of the day, which means something more like favour, approval, or liking. Paul used these words together to make his point that Jew and Greek were one in Christ. But more than this, the words 'grace and 'peace' are basic to our understanding of salvation, for example, 'by God's grace we have been saved' (Eph 2:5,8), and 'since we have been justified by faith, we peace with God' (Rom 5:1)

Most of Paul's letters begin with a prayer of thanksgiving, and at first, his words appear positive. He gives thanks for the grace of God which 'enriches' the church (1:5), for 'spiritual gifts' (1:7), their awaiting the Lord's return (1:7), and those who 'persevere' to the end (1:8). But there is a small clue about what is soon to come in his letter. If you read the 'thanksgivings' from Paul's other letters, for example, Philippians and Colossians, you will discover that when he writes, he normally expresses obvious personal affection and gratitude. Read this from Colossians; 'the Gospel has come to you, and it is bearing fruit ... from the day you heard it' (Col 1:5,6) or from Philippians; 'you hold me in your heart, for all of you share God's grace with me ...' (Phil 1:7). In comparison to these, Paul's thanksgiving here in 1 Corinthians is a touch distant. He writes very correctly about God and the Gospel known and received by the Corinthian Christians (1:4f.), but there is little passion in his words, for example, 'He will also sustain you to the end, blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ' (1:8).

As we get into the letter, we discover that Paul was in fact utterly furious about the way the Christians in Corinth were behaving towards each other and towards God! So in our passage today, Paul was meticulously writing about the truth of the Gospel, its reception by people in Corinth and the consequences, in particular, their, 'spiritual gifts' (1:7). He applauded the church for receiving the Gospel and showing signs of spiritual growth, but he had deep concerns about the church and they would soon discover why. Yet he knows it is right for him to start the letter by giving glory to God for the Gospel, and the fact they knew it.

Today, churches often have difficulties, and we do our best to be gracious and loving to overcome problems; raising money, dealing with the 'difficult people' others in the church struggle with, debating matters of faith and never seeming to 'get anywhere.' You can probably name a few such problems! But the truth is that when Paul begins his letter, he rises above his irritation and angst that will later become obvious. Even for a faulty church, he commends their faith, their growth, their knowledge and their perseverance until the Lord comes again. He is determined to correct their faults and set them on the right track before God, and at the height of the letter, he reminds them that at the heart of the Gospel is something magnificent and all powerful, the mighty love of God (1 Cor 13). God loves His people; this is his message, and this is why he writes in this way about the good things found amongst Corinthian Christians.

Discipleship

Application

Christians unity and holiness

Without doubt, we live in a day when God's people experience little practical unity, and matters of faith are often debated rather than accepted by faith. Indeed, some Christians struggle with the idea that all who call themselves 'Christian' of whatever background, are indeed one in Christ; and many reject the idea that churches have any obligation to do something about this in any concrete or demonstrable way. The idea of holiness is no less controversial; many find it hard to think of themselves as 'holy', that is, set apart by God for a special calling. They prefer the idea of being perhaps 'ordinary' Christians, but remaining in control of things themselves and cautious of letting God in to where He can truly change their lives.

Clear explanation of Gospel truths

Everyone who studies God's Word should be challenged by the forthright and clear writing in Paul's letters and the pure godly logic of what he says. This is why his letters are Scripture, God's Word for us today. At times, Paul's writing can become rather difficult to understand, but in many places, like this, his teaching is very clear. He challenges all God's people to recognise their unity in Christ and their calling to be different to other people in the world, and to be 'God's people'. Heaven and earth are the richer when we reject our own ideas and accept what the Bible teaches.

An enabled church - is it really possible?

Paul's thanks are an expression of the grace of Christ at work in the life of the church, enriching God's people in speech and knowledge and in spiritual gifts, and enabling them to come to terms with all it means to look forward to the coming of Christ in glory. This, in itself, is a significant message. Imagine what it would be like if the church was empowered so that all its members were confident to speak the name of Jesus and testify to the truth of their faith! Imagine a church in which all felt able to engage with the substantial issues of faith raised by Biblical text, not because everyone had become a Bible scholar, but because everyone has become a reader of God's Word and is a keen follower of everything within it! Why is it that we seem to accept that such a vision is unrealistic? Why have we accepted the concept of a disempowered church, devoid in significant areas of the truly liberating grace of Christ?

Ideas for what to do

- *Try attending the meetings and worship services of other churches, and think carefully about the differences between your faith and that of other Christians. What, in your opinion, will help people work together for the Kingdom of God?*
- *Pray for all God's people, the church, whatever you think of them. Pray that all who name the name of Jesus may be ready to read God's Word and get to know their God and Saviour better.*

Questions (for use in groups)

1. *What does this passage teach us about God, and what it teach us about the life of the church?*
2. *How can God's people be united today? What will it take for people of faith to overcome the barriers that exist between churches?*
3. *What do the words 'grace' and 'peace' mean to people today outside the church, and inside it? What do these great words mean to us say to us?*

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, save us from becoming so wrapped up with our own lives and our own work that we do not give You time or to listen to Your voice. Bless us we pray with a spirit of discernment, so that we may hear Your Word to us whenever it comes, and heed its warnings and rejoice in its encouragement. Thank You, Lord Jesus, AMEN