

## Prayers

### To God

Weekly theme: the grace of God

*While you pray, take up a different position from which you are familiar; kneel, stand up, raise your hands, lie down, or keep your eyes open and look at the things around you. Then praise God for His grace, in words or in silence, but with feeling and from your heart.*

### For myself

*Pray today in joy for the life God has given you. Whatever problems you may have, rejoice in what the Lord has done for you and the enormous potential of what lies ahead ...*

### For others

**Dear Lord; save us from a world where people rule who have gained much money and who use their rule to gain more, at everyone's expense. May the people of Your Church stand for the morality of government by representation, and encourage the right of all people to hold their governments to account. Help us to see that by so doing we minister to the poor and reflect in our own world the basic equalities of Your Kingdom rule. May those countries who have a history of Christian government not lose their moral authority by default to a materialistic culture. AMEN**

## Meditation

Watch over us, Lord, in the paths we take;  
That we may be wise in the decisions we make.

Watch over us, Lord, as we speak to others;  
That we may be honest in everything we say.

Watch over us, Lord, as we do our work;  
That we may keep focussed on building Your Kingdom.

Watch over us, Lord, in the company we keep;  
That we may be closer to You than any friend.

Watch over us, Lord, when we feel things deeply;  
That we may remain committed, sincere and faithful.

Watch over us, Lord, when the enemy draws near;  
That we may turn, without hesitation, to Your love.

Watch over us, Lord, in our hopes and dreams;  
That we may accept Your plans for our future.

# Bible Passage

## 1 Corinthians 1:10-17

<sup>10</sup> Fellow believers, I now appeal to you by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same message. Let there be no divisions among you, but may you be restored to a common mind and purpose.

<sup>11</sup> Now it has been made clear me by some from Chloe's household, fellow believers, that there are rivalries among you. <sup>12</sup> What I mean is this. Each one of you says,

- 'I am for Paul,' or
- 'I am for Apollos,' or
- 'I am for Cephas,' or
- 'I am for Christ.'

<sup>13</sup> Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptised in the name of Paul?

<sup>14</sup> I am thankful I baptised none of you except Crispus and Gaius, <sup>15</sup> so no one can suggest that you were baptised in my name! <sup>16</sup> (Oh yes, I also baptised the household of Stephanas; but beyond that, I do not recall baptising anyone else.)

<sup>17</sup> For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the Gospel; and not with skilful speech lest the Cross of Christ be robbed of its power!

## Review

After a brief but powerful introduction to his letter (1:1-9), Paul now begins to raise a serious issue, and the speed with which he turns to this is a measure of his concern. Of all the many issues on his mind which he writes about in his letter later on, from promiscuity (1 Cor 5) to disputes (1 Cor 6), to church order (1 Cor 11,12) and much more, he now attacks the one he thinks is most significant; the thorny matter of the unity of God's people, in Christ.

### **Restoring the church**

Paul's appeal is the strongest possible for a Christian, he says, '*I appeal to you by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ*' (1:10). The word he uses for 'appeal' is used famously by Jesus in the parable of the Prodigal Son, where the Father begs the elder son out of urgent love to abandon his selfishness and join his brother's party (Luke 15:28)! Here, Paul uses the same word to implore the church to abandon its divisions (1:10), and he calls on them to be '*restored*' (1:10). As a tentmaker, Paul often uses the word '*restored*'; it describes the repairing of torn material to make a tent 'good' and usable again. In his time he had successfully restored many tents, and he now sought to mend the church.

Look now at what Paul says about this restoration. He asks the church to rediscover its '*common mind and purpose*'. By '*mind*', he means what people think and believe about God (the strict meaning of the much misunderstood term 'theology'), and by '*purpose*' he means what people do to put their faith into action; for example, mission and service. So before we even get to the famous part of our passage describing divisions in Corinth, we have here an important verse saying significant things about the meaning of Christian unity.

### **Some of the characters at Corinth ...**

A report had clearly come to Paul from some in Corinth from '*Chloe's household*' (1:11). Comments at the end of 1 Corinthians (16:15,17) suggest that one of these was Stephanas (hence the reference to him in verse 16), and church tradition holds that he was responsible for ferrying letters between Corinth and Paul. Chloe's 'household' was probably a church house group, and the letter doubtless contained a variety of news. But the divisions in the church it mentioned were Paul's first priority.

### **The divisions within the church**

Once again, the words used in this verse are fascinating (1:11). In general, we read our translations without much thought; so when we read of 'divisions', or perhaps 'fierce rivalry', as in my translation, we pay little attention. However, Paul's word here is derived from the Greek goddess of violence (Eris), who incites war,

and the equivalent word in Latin means 'battles strife'! It seems that the divisions at Corinth were so established, battle lines had been drawn, and people stood in their camps with arguments ready to repel all invaders! But this was war between God's people, and Paul demanded to stop it!

Paul now lists the awful divisions, but which people had apparently become attached to the famous church leaders, Paul, Apollos (who often followed Paul around, see Acts 18:24-19:1), Peter (using the Hebrew 'Cephas', meaning 'Rock'), and surprisingly, to Christ Himself (1:12). What was going on? You may feel it enough to know that the splits were serious, but as we delve deeper into this letter, we will find that Paul wasted no words. Every detail both was and is important. So what was going on, and was this just a matter of mere attachment to charismatic leaders?

### ***A possible explanation of the divisions at Corinth***

We should not count out the simple explanation that this was just about leaders, but there is another possible explanation and to understand it we must think like ancient people stuck within the rigorous class system of the Roman Empire. Corinth was a town divided by class; it was a Greek city, destroyed by the Romans and rebuilt as a centre of trade and commerce. At the top were Roman citizens with their privileges; they were rich. Underneath were the 'plebs', the townspeople who were Greek in culture, hard working, oppressed, and largely poor. In addition, a large Jewish community also existed, integral to its trade, but fiercely independent.

How can this all help us? It is possible that Paul used the different names to represent the divisions in the church which mirrored those in society. Paul represents Roman citizenship, Apollos the Greek 'plebs', and Peter, specially identified in Hebrew represents the Jews. So what about those who followed 'Christ'? People have debated this for centuries, but most favour the idea that this represents a group who sought to be pure in faith, hence their claim to be of 'Christ'. They wanted, like so many Christians since, to believe they had got it right and others had wandered from the truth. Paul, however, does not leave this group out; he could not allow anyone to claim status before God because of their personal intent to be pure. Everyone at the Corinthian church was tarnished by division, and Paul makes this very clear!

### ***But how can a people baptised in Christ be divided?***

Verse 13 is Paul's immediate answer to these divisions at Corinth, however they have arisen. He cuts to the very heart of the issue saying, '*Is Christ divided?*' He then unleashes two powerful supporting arguments, one of which will dominate what follows, and each is a commanding argument for the unity of God's people; the power of baptism and the preaching of the Cross of Christ.

He insists that our faith is defined in baptism and what it means, and not in the one who performs it. In this clearly recognisable act of initiation, the believer identifies with Christ's death and resurrection. This rite binds all Christians together, even 'households' (i.e. families - see 1:16) without exception! Once baptised, the believer is Christ's and to split the fellowship of Christ's body is unthinkable (1:13)!

### ***The unity of God's people***

But after a brief aside about how many people Paul himself recollects baptising (1:14-16), we conclude with an astonishing verse (1:17), very similar to one found later at the beginning of the next chapter (2:1)! Here, Paul takes the whole matter back its source, to the heart of the Gospel. He declares God's people fundamentally united in the preaching of the Cross of Christ (1:17), the only source of salvation and unity for the church. There is nothing is more important for a Christian than the Cross, and no social skill, intellectual ability or political power stands above it. Moreover, the Cross has its own message and power when it is proclaimed in the preaching of the Gospel. Surely, he appeals, there is only one Gospel message, and every soul is saved by the Cross of Christ! In what therefore can we be divided? Whatever it is, it is not the Gospel!

There is more we can say about this verse as we study the next section up to 2:1. The preaching of the Cross is Paul's next 'big' theme!

## **Discipleship**

### ***Application***

#### ***Divisions in the church today***

The party spirit is alive and well in the churches today, and yet few are worried. When I say I am concerned about this to other Christians, most say 'that's just how it is'. I wonder what Paul would say to our divisions along racial and age lines, as well as along religious fault lines such as 'the state and the church', Protestant and Catholic, or even our divisions over 'baptism'.

Perhaps people want a church where everything is fine and we do not have to address difficult issues, an escape from a demanding complex world. However, we must take Christ and the Cross more seriously than that! Our message is about peace with God and eternal life! Christ welcomed any who believed in Him, and we must let no worldly interests or religiosity stand in the way. In our divided churches, we can still work together to proclaim the Gospel!

### ***Christian fellowship***

True Christian fellowship accepts that all people are different, but knows that in Christ, these differences may be overcome through love. True Christian fellowship seeks not to join with those of like mind but to appeal to all to have the '*same mind that was in Christ Jesus*' (Phil 2:5). It accepts the wisdom and help of Almighty God to overcome all worldly problems or divisions, and does so actively, knowing that in this way, God's will is done.

### ***Baptism?***

This is not the place for a full discussion of baptism, but how extraordinary it is that today, God's people are divided even about baptism and its practice. Together with theological differences, battle lines are drawn everywhere, and anyone who wants to discuss these things will quickly find who is firing the shots from which side. The devil uses every weapon to pull down God's people! Surely, we should be finding ways to accept each other's baptismal practices and for good pastoral reasons, fighting every way in which the devil divides God's people.

## ***Ideas for what to do***

- *Write down a list of things you believe divide your own church fellowship. Discuss what can best be done to deal with one or two of these things.*
- *Do a similar exercise concerning all that divides the wider church, made up of those who believe in Jesus as Saviour*

## ***Questions (for use in groups)***

1. *What does this passage teach us about the nature of the church today, and what does it teach about how we may overcome its problems?*
2. *What divisions exist within the wider church and what can or should be done to deal with these in a spiritually proper manner?*
3. *What does baptism mean today? Why is it a source of division, and what can be done about it?*

## **Final Prayer**

All praise be to You Lord Jesus Christ. You are our Lord, You are our Saviour, You are the Risen Christ. Take us to the Cross and to the empty tomb again to realise the power of Your salvation and the freedom of Your blessings. May we know Your power at work in us to set us free as Your people! **AMEN**