

## Prayers

### To God

*When are you at your most vulnerable? It can be hard to ask this question because we avoid thinking about things that make us emotional. But if we are willing to do this, trusting that God is in control, then we can prayerfully ask for the effective protection of His powerful love which will help us in times of real need.*

### For myself

*Theme - 'standing tall'*

**Lord Jesus Christ, You are awesome! You understand me where I do not; You heal me where my body fails; You put words into my mind when I do not know how to speak; You create good things out of situations I cannot face; You lead me in paths I would not dream of walking! Take my life, Lord Jesus Christ, and do with it what you please! AMEN**

### For others

*Pray about the concerns being voiced internationally concerning data stored about each one of us in our use of the internet, and its potential use. We will all have differing opinions about this, and this is a difficult subject. So if possible, pray with someone else and talk about it before you pray.*

## Meditation

Lord God, touch my life with love;  
Wrap me in the stillness of peace,  
Clothe me in the purity of holiness,  
Calm this spirit in gentle simplicity,  
Meet me within the mysteries of life,  
Shine within the depth of my being,  
Free me from bondage of the mind,  
Draw me to your sources of healing,  
Mend my bone and restore my flesh,  
Lift my soul to heights of faithfulness,  
Recreate my hope, my faith, my love,  
Lord God, redeem this child of Yours,  
Forever, and forever: so be it; AMEN

## Bible Passage

### 1 Corinthians 11:2-16

*<sup>2</sup> I commend you for remembering all about me, and for keeping the traditions I handed on to you. <sup>3</sup> Now, I want you to recognise that Christ is the head of every man, man is the head of his wife, and God is the head of Christ. <sup>4</sup> Any man praying or prophesying with something over his head dishonours his head, <sup>5</sup> and any woman praying or prophesying with her head uncovered dishonours her head, she is like one whose head has been*

shaved. <sup>6</sup> For if a woman does not cover her head, she may as well have her hair cut off; and if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or be shaved, she should cover her head. <sup>7</sup> Now a man ought not to have his head covered, being the image and glory of God, but a wife is the glory of a husband.

<sup>8</sup> Now, man was not made from woman, but woman from man. <sup>9</sup> Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. <sup>10</sup> For this reason and because of the angels, a woman ought to have responsibility for her own head. <sup>11</sup> However in the Lord, neither woman is independent of man nor man independent of woman. <sup>12</sup> For just as woman came from man, so also man is now born of woman; and all things are from God.

<sup>13</sup> Judge for yourselves whether it is fitting for a woman to pray to God with her head unveiled! <sup>14</sup> Nature itself does not even teach you about whether it disgraces a man if he wears long hair, <sup>15</sup> whereas if a woman has long hair, it is her glory; for her hair is given to her as a covering. <sup>16</sup> But if anyone thinks this is contentious, we have no other custom, and nor do the churches of God.

## Review

This extraordinary passage has been argued over for centuries, because it touches on some difficult subjects. These are first, the head-covering of women in worship (11:4-16), and second, the 'headship' of men over women together with how this idea arises in Genesis as a reflection of God's created order (11:3,8). We will certainly tackle these thorny issues, but I must warn you that some of this passage is not what it may seem.

In translating the Greek text, I have found myself changing some of the phrases you remember from other well known translations. I do not do this casually, because all of us who believe the Bible is the Word of God are concerned to try to get closer to what Paul meant when he wrote, and what his words mean for us now. In places, even in the Greek language in which he wrote, Paul's meaning is not very clear, especially where the two difficult themes, women's head-covering and the relationship of a man and his wife, both overlap.

### **A word of encouragement (11:2)**

The first verse in this passage (11:2) is a rare word of encouragement to the Corinthians. Perhaps Paul is wanting to try and build bridges, and overcome the personal problems created by all the disagreements he has just dealt with (1 Cor 5-10), but he praises the Corinthians for their faith. Specifically, he '*commends*' them for remembering those '*traditions*' handed on from when he first preached (11:2); but what does he mean by these '*traditions*'?

Today, we tend to think of tradition as dead religion, and because of this negative connotation some Bible versions translate this word '*teaching*' (see the NIV), but I can assure you that the word Paul used is 'tradition'. What does he mean? For Paul, the true and only tradition of the church is the teaching and preaching of the Gospel in its simplest and purest form; the message of Christ crucified (see 2:2 and 2 Thess 2:15, 3:6). This is the one feature of church life uniting all God's people, and if we try to add to it, we would add no more of God, but only our own human frailties and divisions (see 1 Cor 1:12f. 3:3f.)

### **A summary of this interesting passage!**

So we now move on with Paul's analysis of God, Christ, men and women, and '*headship*', which ends with his famous comment about women's headgear (11:3-7)! Then, as if this is not difficult enough, Paul continues in the next paragraph to mull over the same issues, mystifying us with a comment about angels, who it seems might be most offended if women do not cover their heads in worship (11:8-12)! The last paragraph (11:13-16) seems rather casual, as if Paul has stopped making his points and is merely calling on custom (11:16), whatever we make of this!

In order to understand all this we must do two things. First, grapple with what and why Paul speaks about headship and the relationship of men and women, Christ and God. After this, we will see a picture emerge of worship in the early church which is quite different to that of today. When we understand this, Paul's words about head covering will fall more easily into place!

### **An allegory about origins, and headship**

In verse 3, Paul says, '*Christ is the head of every man, man is the head of his wife, and God is the head of Christ*'. This is an allegory about the origins of humanity, and in reading it we must remember that in ancient times 'headship' was more about 'order' than about authority, and Paul uses the term here in the same way we might use it when referring to the 'head' of a stream as the place where it starts. Paul refers accurately to

the Old Testament Scripture which describes the origins of humanity (Genesis 1 and 2), but completely avoids the misogyny of his own day, and it is a tragedy if we now read him as if he has not. So I will now explain this with respect to headship.

In the trinity, the relationship of God and Christ is equal. Therefore, to say, *'God is the head of Christ'* (11:3) is to say that God is made known to us in the Bible before Christ, which is simple fact. We believe that Christ was with God at creation (Prov 8:22, John 1:1f.), but these interpretations came after Christ was born and made known to the world in New Testament times. So as far as their relationship is concerned, God is not greater than or more important than Jesus; Jesus Himself says that He and the Father are *'One'* (see John 17:22,23).

### ***Men and women, prophesying together in worship!***

So what about men and women, when we can no longer say that from Scripture, headship means that one dominates the other! To say that a man is the *'head'* of woman (11:3 etc.) is to speak of the order of creation found in Genesis (11:8, Gen 2:22), but not of male domination. Men and women are made equal (Gen 1:27), and the awful problem of male domination is a dire result of the Fall, as God's words in Genesis make very clear; *'your desire shall be for your husband ...'* (Gen 3:16). Altogether, the idea of *'headship'* expresses the complex nature of both order and equality within human relationships, in the Godhead, and between men and women.

But what does this have to do with what women wear on their heads in worship? To answer this we must learn about what worship was like in the early church. In those days, society generally accepted that men and women worshipped their gods separately, as in Judaism or in most Roman religions; the role of women was secondary. In the early church however things were very different. Men and women both *'prayed'* and *'prophesied'* in worship together (11:4,5); this was a social revolution! Others who heard of this thought it highly promiscuous!

### ***The head covering of women in worship***

No wonder then, that Paul suggests strongly that women should cover their heads in worship! In those days, a woman whose hair was uncovered in public was regarded as presenting herself as a prostitute! No such gossip would help the church! Paul taught and believed that it was right for women to cover their hair in worship (11:13-16). A woman's hair was part of her *'glory'* to be reserved for her husband (11:13-15), and Paul also preserves the integrity of marriage, by adding, *'a wife is the glory of a husband'* (11:7)!

While Paul's teaching here relates to cultural issues, it is worth remembering some of the other great phrases from this passage. At one point Paul emphasises the equality of men and women before God with a glorious phrase; *'neither woman is independent of man nor man independent of woman'* (11:11). He also counters any suggestion that women are secondary to men by pointing out that although *'woman came from man ... man is now born of woman'* (11:12)! The text only makes sense to those who accept the equality of all before God.

### ***Angels***

One verse, however, has caused great consternation, and this is verse 10, which speaks of angels as if they have some reaction or response to the head-covering of women in worship, which we must account for! There is little in the Bible for us to research angels, apart from knowing that they are God's messengers. I reckon that Paul is simply reflecting an ancient belief that angels were active in the exercise of prophecy, that is, delivering God's messages (see 11:4,5). His message is obscure to us, but as before, he did not want the prophetic word of God compromised by people's attitudes towards women's hair and its covering.

Finally, Paul begs the church to judge these things for themselves (11:13). He does not want the length of women's hair and how they present themselves to become a social barrier to the Gospel (11:15)! His one concern is that men and women should worship together unimpeded and that nothing should stand in the way of the Gospel.

## **Discipleship**

### ***Application***

#### ***Keeping the traditions of the church***

After delving through some of the more obscure features of the early church and its practices, it is worth remembering that Paul's first point here is about keeping the true traditions of the church, which are the Gospel of salvation, and nothing more. In the midst of our own difficulties today with traditions often born out of the society in which we live, it is worth remembering Paul's point that the traditions of the church, that is, the Gospel, are indispensable.

### ***The relationship of men and women***

If I now explain this for myself; I am married to Carmel, and she is my equal before God. I can also say from the quotes in this passage that I am the head of my wife and she is my glory, and together we are made in the image of God. But if you think that my saying this places my wife in a submissive role in our marriage or before God, then you would be wrong. She is my equal and we submit to each other, as Scripture says (Ephesians 5:21). You cannot put a knife between God and Christ because they are one; and you cannot put a knife between my wife and I because we are one.

### ***Wearing headgear***

Now about headwear! I am happy agree with my wife that it is up to her whether she covers her head to pray. This seems to me to be her prerogative from 11:10. We are one in Christ by marriage, and I am happy that she decide these things for herself, I do not have to tell her or advise her, but she sometimes wants my opinion! Sincerely, we should present ourselves in such a way as commends the Gospel in whatever setting we find ourselves, and we should encourage each other to do the same. This seems to me to be the message of this passage for today.

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

- Read this passage in some other Bible versions and check out what they say. Explore each part of the text you may find hard to understand, perhaps read Genesis 1-3 as well.
- Think carefully about the place of men and women in worship today. How can they best pray and prophesy together?

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

1. What should women do with their hair when coming to church to pray today?
2. What does this passage teach us about relationships in marriage and between men and women generally?
3. How can we make sure that what we do in church today does not impede the Gospel?

## **Final Prayer**

Lord God, You know how difficult we find it to be Your people and follow Your ways. Remove from us any unnecessary barriers to our faith, so that Your will may be done in our lives, we pray. **AMEN**