

## Prayers

### To God

All praise be to You Living Lord, for in my darkest depths You lift my soul, and from my deepest despair You raise me up. Remind me daily of Your power to save, Lord God, so that I never forget the wonder of Your grace and the provision You have made for my life. I thank You, Lord Jesus; I thank you from the very depths of my heart, and I praise You: AMEN

### For myself

*Pray about the decisions you are currently making, and be sure to put them before the Lord in prayer. We get on with our decision making too often without pausing to consider our Lord's gracious will.*

### For others

*Pray for all those who are seeking peace through peaceful means, and working with people and nations for justice for all.*

## Meditation

The freshness of each new day reveals the blessings of the Lord  
And the gifts He gives to those who receive them and use them:

The offer of precious moments spent in reading the Word;  
The challenge of sustaining the work He has given us to do;  
The chance to be creative in the path of discipleship and faith;  
The excitement of knowing the Lord has more for us each day;  
The valuable moments of quiet peace which refresh the soul;  
The freedom of praying, to bless other people and the world;  
The honour of living the life of Christ, and helping the poor;  
The opportunity to love again, where yesterday we failed;

How can we show gratitude for the privileges we have been given?  
Except in loving the Lord our God and doing what He has called us to do.

## Bible Passage

### 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

<sup>1</sup> Fellow believers, I now remind you of the Gospel I preached to you, which you received, and in which you now stand, <sup>2</sup> and through which you are saved, that is, if you are holding fast to the message I preached to you, and have not believed in vain. <sup>3</sup> For I handed on to you as of primary importance what I also received:

Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,

<sup>4</sup> He was buried, and was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,

<sup>5</sup> He appeared to Cephas and then to the twelve.

<sup>6</sup> After this, He appeared to more than five hundred believers at one time  
(most of whom are still living, though some have died)

<sup>7</sup> and then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles.

<sup>8</sup> Then, last of all, he appeared also to me, as to one of untimely birth. <sup>9</sup> I am the least of the apostles, one who is not worthy to be called an apostle because I persecuted the church of God.

<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me has not been without purpose; indeed, I worked harder than any of them, though not I, but the grace of God within me. <sup>11</sup> So whether it was I or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you believe.

## Review

As we move towards the end of 1 Corinthians, the long chapter 15 comes as something of a surprise. It begins in our passage today with a strong call to the Corinthians to hold fast to the faith as preached to them by Paul (15:1-11). It then continues in the central section with an impassioned plea for God's people to believe in the resurrection (15:12-34), and concludes with a remarkable essay on the reality of the resurrection life and offers some extraordinary clues of the End Times when all God's people will be caught up in His final 'resurrection' (15:35-58).

### **1 Corinthians 15, Paul's powerful and concluding message**

So what is doing here in chapter 15 of his letter to Corinthians? He begins in today passage by reinforcing a message we have found almost throughout the letter, which is that God's people should hold fast to the truth of the Gospel which was preached to them, and which was proved effective because of its power to save them and bring them into a new life. In these verses (15:3-8)), Paul quotes what seems to be a faith formula, arguably one of the early 'creeds', recited by Christians as a form of early Christian doctrine, and which was a summary of the Gospel Paul preached.

One thing that may have escaped our notice however. At the beginning of the letter, Paul preached famously that the Gospel was the message of Christ '*and Him crucified*' (1:23, 2:2), a passage frequently used as a text for sermons! However, as we know from all Paul teaches in his other great letters (especially Romans), he preached the Gospel of Salvation based not just on the message of Christ crucified, but also Christ resurrected and glorified (e.g. See Romans 6, or Colossians 2:12). In the same way 1 Corinthians, it is now obvious that the letter begins by focussing on 'Christ crucified' and finishes in chapter 15 with a strong message about Christ raised and glorified! Paul does not merely write a letter like a list of what he wants to say; his letters are masterpieces of literature through which we can discover eternal truth if our minds are ready to receive it. So the 'full Gospel' is about Christ, crucified, and resurrected, and as we will see tomorrow, Paul rubbishes the idea that Christian doctrine is anything less. We had better pay attention!

### ***The power of the received message (15:1-3)***

The first full sentence of chapter 15 runs through verses 1 and 2, and read together, these verses highlight Paul's concern that people forget the power of the Gospel by which they are saved too easily. He had been the first Christian in Corinth (Acts 18) and after preaching the Gospel there, many were saved. The first converts then preached the same message to others with the same results, giving birth to the church there. Paul is confident in these facts, '*the Gospel I preached to you, which you received, and in which you now stand ...*' (15:1). However, he is worried that over time, people had become distracted from the purity of this Gospel message; he cautions, '*... that is, if you are holding fast to the message I preached to you ...*' (15:2). As we read this, we remember the frightening list of problems the church has presented him with (chapters 5-10).

There is no substitute for this Gospel and its power, however, and Paul has no cure for the church's ills other than the same Gospel message. He says, '*for I handed on to you as of primary importance what I also received ...*' (15:3), and before we study this further, we must reflect on why this chain of hearing, receiving and passing on of the Gospel has apparently been broken. The answer is found partly in Paul's brief comment that some have '*believed in vain*' (15:2); for some, their faith has had no consequence in their lives, for this is what '*in vain*' means. Rather like the seed sown on thorny ground or choked by weeds (Matt 13:1f.), some receive the Gospel with good intent, but as Jesus warned, it did not bear fruit. Jesus knew it, Paul saw it at Corinth, and we can see it today: evil and self-centredness compromise the Gospel message and its extraordinary power.

### ***The facts about Christ; the form of a creed? (15:3,4)***

From the earliest days of the church, people have noticed that this passage contains what looks like a 'creed'. Early Christians used such forms of words, especially at baptismal services, to summarise their doctrine and faith, and we can find evidence of early 'creeds' in other Scriptures (e.g. Philippians 2:6-11). It may be that Paul wrote this creed, but the writing here is different from Paul's normal writing. Certainly, Paul typically insists that for the church, nothing is as important as the preached Gospel, it is of '*primary importance*' (15:3).

The statement of faith is best understood when set out as in our passage:

- **Christ died for our sins** according to the Scriptures
- **He was buried, and was raised on the third day** according to the Scriptures
- He appeared to Cephas and then to the twelve
- He appeared to more than five hundred believers at one time
- And then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles

You can see from this that the first two lines of the 'creed' emphasise the two key facts about Jesus; that Christ '*died for our sins*', and the '*He was buried and rose again*'. So here we have the great focus of Christian faith yet again; Christ crucified and Christ resurrected, and Paul's inclusion of the words '*for our sins*' makes clear the effectiveness of Christ's saving death (see also Gal 1:4, 1 John 2:2, 4:10 and Romans 6:5f.). Christian faith is not an abstract belief in various ideas about Jesus or about God. From the earliest of days, it has been built on these two facts about Jesus and the preaching of them to each new generation.

### ***The supporting evidence (15:5-8)***

In addition to this, the facts in the creed are supported by evidence. Now in the first century, it was generally believed that any fact required two pieces of supporting evidence. One example of this is Jesus' discussion of the 'evidence' of His divinity, which He says is supported by the evidence of His miracles and by the '*witness of the Father*' (John 8:18, 14:11). Here, Paul says that the supporting evidence for the facts of the creed are supplied first by Scripture, and second by the appearances of Jesus to various people, including himself.

In speaking of the evidence of Scripture, Paul might have meant the Old Testament; but already, the early church was beginning to gather stories of Jesus and other writings so they could begin a holy record of what had happened, the new 'Scriptures' of the church we now call the 'New Testament'. The second form of evidence is provided by the appearances of the risen Jesus, after His crucifixion. Paul lists Peter as the first witness (not the women, as recorded in most of the Gospels), then the twelve (as in Matt 28, Luke 24 and John 21), then '*500 believers all at once*', an event not recorded in the Gospels or Acts, unless it reflects the Pentecostal early church experience of church growth (see Acts 2:41, 4:4).

The most interesting appearance here is to James (15:7), who must have been James, the Lord's brother (Gal 1:19). Within Scripture, only Paul mentions that James, the leader of the Jerusalem church, is the Lord's brother and a son of Mary, who may have been converted by a special appearance of the Lord. We imagine that Peter was the leader of the church in Jerusalem, but the evidence from Acts is that the real leader was this James (Acts 12:17, 15:13f. and 21:18 - not James the disciple, who was killed by Herod Antipas - Acts 12:2).

### ***Paul's personal testimony***

Paul has staked his own life on the Gospel and its integrity, and so here, at this critical point in the letter, he appeals to the Corinthian church to accept the historical fact of his own involvement in their very existence. In verses 8 to 11, he firstly links himself to the chain of historical evidence for the risen Christ. The Lord, he says, '*also appeared to me ...*' (15:8), and although his experience of the risen Jesus is something he strongly defends (e.g. see Galatians 1:12), he is suitably meek about it here, describing himself as '*one of untimely birth ... the least of the apostles*' (15:8,9). In a rare personal revelation of weakness, he declares his shame at his earlier involvement in the persecution of the church of God (15:9).

The final paragraph of the passage, however, returns strongly to the theme. Paul has nevertheless done the work of the Gospel to the benefit of the Corinthians, and he will not let anyone suggest he has shirked the Gospel task in any way; '*by the grace of God I am what I am ... I worked harder than any of them ...*' (15:10). Moreover, at this early stage of the growth of the church, he remains confident that the Gospel message is the same whoever has preached it (15:11). There is one Gospel and one faith, and he urges the Corinthians to unite in the faith. Though as we will see tomorrow, he has mer to say about the resurrection, and those who question it!

# Discipleship

## Application

### *The power of the Gospel today*

When Paul says '*Fellow believers, I now remind you of the Gospel I preached to you, which you received, and in which you now stand, and through which you are saved.*' (15:1,2) he could be addressing any Christian congregation. Although Paul knew full well to whom he was writing, it is also possible that he knew his letters would be used and read by more people than those for whom they were written. Within Paul's work there is a complete confidence in the unique and unchangeable nature of the Gospel, and he has been proved to be right, because it is remarkable that with the vast changes that have happened in the world over two thousand years, the church remains focussed on the same Gospel. All attempts to change it and reinterpret its basic meaning according to what is said here in his letter have failed, and a Gospel that preaches the saving power of Christ's death and resurrection remains the heartbeat of God's people, the church.

### *Using Creeds, and doctrine*

Unfortunately, the Christian church today is experiencing a period of doubt and shame in theology and doctrine, due to the failures of theologians in the last two hundred years to connect with the historic Gospel and accept it as God's will for His people today. If you look into the world of theology today you will find that it is more like an academic subject linked to the arts and human expression; it is of some interest to people who may wish to teach religious education in secular schools but little else. In the church, people are generally suspicious of anything to do with theology or even doctrine, given the mixed and peculiar signals they have heard of which they cannot connect with the received traditions of the Gospel.

I see no way out of this conundrum, and I see no way to help people in these different 'religious' camps talk to each other especially where they serve the church through the education of Christian ministers and leaders. This remains a disastrous area of mis-education in which the church in England, for example, remains badly served. Some churches are aware of this and there are some notable exceptions to the general academic paucity of theology available today, but in mainstream churches the picture remains grim. Personally, I therefore believe that God will start again with His people, and a new 'theology' and a new 'doctrine' will arise from God's people that is connected by faith with the historic Gospel and evangelical faith of the church that has been carried through the ages not by its professors of theology, but by its people. It will be based on exactly what Paul speaks of here.

## Ideas for what to do

- *In what ways do you 'hold on' to your faith? Reflect on how you can do things that enable you to maintain and sustain your faith, rather than just presume that it will continue.*
- *Pray for all those who find it hard to be sure about their faith, especially when life is hard and tough, and when they doubt God because things get too bad. Pray that they will know the special blessing of the Lord's presence as they do what He wants of them, and begin to trust Him in all circumstances*

## Questions (for use in groups)

1. *Discuss in what you mean by 'salvation', and whether the church is united in what this means.*
2. *What would you feel is necessary to add to the creed in this passage in order to make it a true reflection of your faith?*
3. *In what ways are you commissioned to work for the Lord, and what 'grace' do you experience to enable you to do this?*

## Final Prayer

We love You, Lord Jesus, for Your grace has proved gloriously sufficient for all our spiritual needs. You have stayed with us on difficult paths; ministered to our broken hearts; received our worship when we lifted You in praise; and guided us through troubled times. We praise You, Lord Jesus. **AMEN**