

## Prayers

### To God

*Pray to give the Lord all your concentration in this small moment of time. Let your contact with the Lord right now be something by which the pathway of this day changes for the better.*

### For myself

Weekly theme: generosity

*Ask the Lord for generosity of heart towards those who you find difficult and annoying, whether at work, at home, at church, or at any other time or place*

### For others

**Father God, bless those children of the world You have created and You love, who are caught up in the terrors of war and who have become refugees. Thousands, perhaps tens of thousands flee tyranny in Syria and children are without homes and schools, and families lack the basics to offer children any home comforts. We ask for Your mercy to cover these dear children, and that even through the turmoil of their experience, good may eventually come to their country, and they might live in such peace as allows the proclamation of the Gospel by which they may be saved. AMEN**

## Meditation

When life is quiet, Lord, fill my mind with what is good;  
And keep the enemy away from my thoughts and feelings.

When life is routine, Lord, give me the concentration I need  
To pay attention to the detail of what I do, and honour You with my work.

When life becomes difficult, Lord, save me from panicking;  
Help me to focus on You, and trust in Your spiritual guidance.

When life is horrendous, Lord, give me the courage to hold firmly to You;  
Drawing from Your Spirit the energy I need to get through every trouble.

When life becomes easier, Lord, may I not forget You or Your love;  
But remember Your faithfulness through good times and bad.

When life is quiet, Lord, fill my mind with what is good;  
Keep me alert, and prepare me, in faith, for all that's to come.

## Bible Passage

### 1 Corinthians 3:1-9

<sup>3:1</sup> Yet, fellow believers, I was not able to speak to you as spiritual people, but as worldly people, as babes in Christ. <sup>2</sup> I gave you milk, not solid food; for you were not able to receive it, and even now

you cannot <sup>3</sup> because you are still worldly. For as long as there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not worldly and behaving like other people? <sup>4</sup> For when one says, 'I belong to Paul,' and another, 'I belong to Apollos,' are you not like others?

<sup>5</sup> Who then is Apollos? Who is Paul? They are servants, through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. <sup>6</sup> I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. <sup>7</sup> So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is of importance, but only God, who makes things grow. <sup>8</sup> The one who plants and the one who waters are united, and each will receive recompense according to his own labour; <sup>9</sup> for we are God's co-workers and you are God's field, God's building.

## Review

As we enter the third chapter of 1 Corinthians, we find Paul in more pensive mood. He is deeply concerned about the splits and divisions in the church at Corinth and at this stage in the letter is wondering how to go about addressing this and the many other problems notified to him. Problems that we will soon become very familiar with as we read through the letter. It seems that Paul wants to be able to say more to the church of deeper spiritual significance (3:2), but the fact of their divisions makes him cautious about going on to offer the 'solid food' he would like to give. We will find out soon enough that Paul typically holds nothing back when it comes to delivering his spiritual advice, but it is fascinating to read about his thoughts as he reflects on the task ahead of him.

### ***How do you give a message to a split church?***

Paul is faced by a church that is still split apart by divisions and by '*jealousy and quarrelling*' (3:3,4). How then can he sort out their problems by appealing to the highest principles of Christian faith? His readers cannot even get on with each other! He therefore makes one further appeal, and returns to the heart of the problem, being the different 'named' leaders attached to the various 'cliques' within the Corinthian church. This time, he focusses on two of them only, '*Apollos*', and '*Paul*' (3:5,6), and his choice is purposeful. The ministry of these great two mid first-century evangelists and preachers was a significant feature of the Christian landscape at the time. Paul and Apollos are mentioned not just here at the beginning of 1 Corinthians but they are also found in these Scriptures; Acts 18 and 19, 1 Cor 16:12 and Titus 3:13.

The picture Paul eventually draws of the growth of the church under these great leaders is important (3:5-9). The picture Paul begins in our reading today is tantalising, and it continues tomorrow as Paul speaks of God's glorious purposes in building up His church. We speak today of the phenomenon of church growth as if it was a welcome addition to church life, and we forget that in the first century, God's church faced a radical choice, either grow or die! Church growth was not an optional extra, it was an utterly essential feature of God's will for His people.

### ***Milk, Babies and solid food!***

Three places in Scripture contain the language of 'milk' and 'solid food'. Here, Hebrews 5, and 1 Peter 2; so it seems likely that this picture was a feature of the teaching of more than one apostle! But what does it mean? In each scripture, 'milk' refers to the basic Gospel message, probably meaning essential teaching about salvation through the grace of God and by faith in Jesus. Peter says, '*crave pure spiritual milk so that by it you may grow up in your salvation ...*' (1 Peter 2:2).

For differing reasons, each apostle teaches strongly that the individual needs more than milk for an adult spiritual life; the point is obvious, babies move on from milk to solid food quickly, and the apostles were looking for the evidence of maturity so they could teach deeper truths. Paul wants to be able to speak frankly to the Corinthians with Gospel '*solid food*' (3:2), in which this message is applied to complex church and personal life situations. Equally, Hebrew is concerned that God's people have not grown, and urges they start again with the '*milk, still being an infant*' (Hebrews 5:13), so they can then move on to the '*solid food ... for the mature*' (Hebrews 5:14).

Within a few years of planting churches, each of these great leaders sought evidence that converts were so grounded in Gospel basics that deeper truths could be built upon this foundation. They were not offering addition 'knowledge' available only to the mature, but an appropriate way of enabling God's people to grow on faith. All of this speaks to us about church grow now, and the on-going work of the Spirit within the believer.

## ***Jealousy and quarrelling***

We have already read Paul's outburst against the horrors of division in the church, in which he goes to the heart of the matter, which is ignorance of Christ and worldly attachment to enigmatic leaders (1:10-17). One sin leads to another, as Genesis 3 so clearly examples, and Paul cannot help reminding the Corinthians that the fruit of division in the church is '*jealousy and quarrelling*' (3:3). These insidious features of church life are clear evidence that something is wrong and that the milk of the `gospel is not yet properly absorbed. However we might like to analyse these things, they demonstrate not faith but worldliness (3:3). But Paul has a different vision, one in which instead of such animosity, all things '*work together for good*' (Romans 8:28).

## ***A picture of church bliss***

Yet again, Paul turns to the basic teaching about growth from the lips of Jesus, which is the growing of a plant from a seed. Here, he apportions out different aspects of growth to different church leaders. Each one therefore has a distinct place within the life of God's people that must be honoured and respected; though Paul is careful to use language that depicts himself and Apollos in a lowly rather than an exalted state. He describes each of them as '*servants*' (3:5) of God's people and not exalted leaders.

Then, speaking exclusively of himself and Apollos, he insists that both must be valued by all; '*I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth*' (3:6). This is an important argument, because Paul is therefore able to say that all things come under the sovereign authority of God. From a place where Christians have been promoting their allegiance to men such as himself and Apollos, this teaching urges its readers to refocus on Christ. His words are clear enough, '*so neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is of importance, but only God, who makes things grow. The one who plants and the one who waters are united*' (3:7,8).

So already, Paul has not held back from speaking his mind. There is a godly solution to Christian division, and it is to refocus on Christ and see the contribution of each church group as a valued part of the make up of the whole. This, of course, is the generally accepted principle of ecumenical work even to this day; '*we are co-workers and you are God's field, God's building ...*' (3:9).

# **Discipleship**

## ***Application***

### ***Church growth***

There is no doubt that behind this passage is Paul's concern about the church itself. It was of course full of faulty people, but Paul expected those same people to address their faults. He did not expect that all Christians would be able to iron out every problem, but he did expect them to try, and do this especially where there was clear evidence that something ungodly was happening; and divisions were ungodly, at least in Paul's eyes.

We must therefore consider carefully how to respond to this teaching. We can simply say we will try to do our best to work with Christ as our focus; but the evidence before our eyes is that we come from a church divided, and the world does not readily hear our message because Satan has successfully continued to split the church asunder in every generation.

### ***Evangelism***

I suggest that this passage and the picture Paul presents here and continues tomorrow contains a radically different picture of evangelism to that we so often use today. It is a picture of leaders sharing in ministry and the church growing in faith and gradually knowing the difference between the '*milk*' and '*solid food*' of the Gospel. We must be careful to develop our understand of this and make sure that our evangelism is shared between those who sow and those who reap, and that the church is fully involved in both.

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

- Pray for the church of God, for its evangelistic work of declaring the Gospel and for those who are gifted to do this work. Pray that they work together for the building up of the Kingdom
- Look at the life of your church and assess where there are arguments and strife. What divisions lie at the heart of this, and how may they be overcome. Is anyone interested in doing this?

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

1. *What sort of a person do you think Paul was? Is there anyone to whom you compare him today?*
2. *Does the picture of 'planting watering and growing' help you understand the growth of the church? What does it say to you?*
3. *How can God's people work to overcome division within the church today? Use your own church as an example in this discussion.*

## **Final Prayer**

Eternal God, who does all things well, read our minds and teach us truth; read our emotions and enrich our lives; read our hearts and strengthen our character. We need Your works of grace within us; so make us worthy to receive your blessings. AMEN