

Prayer

Jesus, my Lord and Master; other people might think I am foolish to speak to You like this. They think of You as a religious option, an ideal, or a fanciful myth, but I know that You are real and not a figment of my imagination. May my faith be so apparent within my words and deeds that others see not just someone of religious interest, but a believer commitment to all truth, honesty and goodness in the world. May they see evidence of a God of love, and seek to know more. Thank You, Lord Jesus: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Take time to reflect on the sufferings of Jesus as He travelled towards Jerusalem on His way to die. What would you do to try and speak to Jesus on the way, and what might He say to you in reply?

On-going prayers

- **Pray for North Africa and the Arab world:** Pray for Yemen and Bahrain, and the other countries of the Arabian peninsula that have also been affected by popular unrest
- Pray about the way that the media in your country is owned and managed. Pray that your news media will remain essentially independent
- Give thanks for the gift of music and those who use this within our churches

Meditation

Lord Jesus, how will you speak to me? What sound will I hear?

An explosion of noise which grabs my attention,
and changes my perspective on everything I see?

A quiet voice that whispers hidden truths in my ear,
to reveal the secrets of Your glorious Kingdom?

A song of tuneful music, with patterns and rhythms,
reflecting the love of Christ growing in my soul?

A never ending roar like the sound of a motorway,
like the great commission to speak out God's Word?

A cacophony of sound that presses on my ear
needing delicate discernment for a whisper of grace?

The silence created after a deafening 'STOP'!
Your divine imperative to rest, and be refreshed?

Lord Jesus, You speak to me throughout my life; let me hear!

Bible passage - 2 Corinthians 1:1-7

¹ Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother:

To the church of God that is in Corinth, including all the saints throughout Achaia: ² Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all help, ⁴ who helps us in all our troubles, so that we may be able to help those who are in any trouble with the help we ourselves have received from God. ⁵ For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ, our help overflows. ⁶ So if we are distressed, it is for your help and salvation; if we are helped, it is for your help, which is the result of patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. ⁷ For our hope for you is

unshaken, because we know that just as you share in the sufferings, you also share in the help.

Bible Study

Review

Paul's second letter to the Corinthians is a powerful letter of self justification, in which Paul sets out an explanation of his ministry before his many critics. In the course of writing, Paul is led to some great heights of spiritual writing, giving some of his most powerful illustrations of Christian faith; for example, as treasure found in 'clay pots' (4:7-16). Few can forget his account of being caught up into a 'third heaven' (12:1-10), or his confession of a 'thorn in the flesh' found in the same passage. Yet throughout the letter, Paul persists in explaining himself and his ministry. Why does he do this?

Years earlier, Paul had written the first letter to the Corinthians, which is a blunt criticism of the church there. Some took offence when the letter was received, and the New Testament contains hints of the tension that grew between Paul and the Corinthians. For example, in the comment, '*if I have caused you pain ...*' (2:2). We do not know exactly what happened, but Paul later thought it wise to write a second letter addressing his critics and defending his ministry.

The formality of the beginning of the letter is crisp (1:1,2). As in his other letters, Paul wrote as an apostle alongside Timothy his co-worker, and it was essential that his readers accept his apostolic status. He wrote specifically to the church at Corinth, but it seems that he wanted the letter read further afield, mentioning '*all the saints throughout Achaia*' (1:1). Achaia was the Roman province covering the large prominence forming the southern half of modern day Greece (and also Athens), a region Paul visited on his second missionary journey (Acts 16-18). Lastly, he offered his typical greeting of '*grace ... and peace*' (1:2), but without adding details that might indicate any warmth!

Paul continues with a prayer of blessing, again typical of his many letters. But it does not give thanks for the faith of the Corinthians, or praise their witness (for comparison, read Philippians 1:3-10). After praising God as the '*Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all help*' (1:3), Paul goes on to describe the sufferings of Christ and His church, and the help given by Christ and by fellow Christians to alleviate suffering.

Paul must have had a reason for writing in this way, which was that he wanted to get to the heart of what he believed was the problem between him and the Corinthians. But at this point, he does not offer blame or defend his theology, he refers more obliquely to 'troubles' and 'suffering'. The whole passage is dominated by Paul's talk of the suffering of Christ, of the church as a whole, and of his own suffering (using 'we' to speak of himself and Timothy).

Before we look at what Paul meant by this suffering, we must look at the word 'help', which occurs eight times, and clearly dominates the passage. This translates the Greek word 'parakaleo', which conveys the idea of 'calling someone to oneself'. Most translations use words such as 'comfort', 'consolation', or 'encouragement'. The large number of translations is possible because of the wide range of meaning found within this one Greek word, but all of them are brought together in the idea of summoning and obtaining help. I have therefore translated this word 'help', and it seems to me to make the passage come alive. Too often, other Bible versions read like an extremely complicated theological formula, and this may contribute to the fact that 2 Corinthians is far from the best read letter of the New Testament. Its reputation is that it is too difficult to understand!

So what is Paul saying here about suffering and help? It is tempting to assume that the troubles and suffering Paul refers to here are the sufferings of Christ for our salvation. However, when Paul says that the sufferings '*flow over into our lives*' and thence flow out to others (1:5), we need to ask ourselves whether we have the right picture. Now in Paul's day, it was commonly taught that when the Messiah came there would be a time of trouble and distress in the world, commonly called 'the sufferings of the Messiah'. In the early church, this was understood to mean two things, firstly the suffering of Jesus on the Cross for the redemption of the world, but secondly, the sufferings of the early Christians as they experienced the age of God's new work in Christ. Remember, Jesus Himself had warned His disciples about the suffering of persecution and other troubles (Matt 5:11,12), so our passage is best understood in this way.

All in all, this passage can now be understood as Paul's call to the Corinthians to share their troubles, because this was a true sharing in Christ. In a way, Paul was seeking to reach out to the Corinthians with whom he had become a little estranged. He knew that their troubles could only be overcome through true

sharing from the heart. Of course, within a letter, Paul could only share his own thoughts, but this appeal at the very beginning seems like a strong hint to the reader that the letter must be read in the spirit of heart to heart sharing. Out of the great love of Christ, sufficient for all things (1:5), it was surely possible for God's people to overcome all their troubles! We must surely always face difficulty within the church with this open and sympathetic attitude.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What can we learn from this passage about helping one another within the church?
2. What can we understand from this passage about the relationship between Paul and the people at Corinth?
3. When you have difficulties in life, how do you like to deal with them? Do you feel that you can share your difficulties or do you like to keep them secret?

Personal comments by author

Every New Testament letter is written for a purpose, and when we begin to grasp this, we can find our way into it more quickly, and without risk of misinterpretation. When I went to University, I read about something called 'reader response criticism' of Biblical text. This included the idea that people were entitled to pick up the Bible and read it, finding within it whatever they wanted. Since then, I have found that although few people go to theological school, there are indeed many who pick up the Bible and take what they want from it! God can of course work through any way He chooses, but we will surely be blessed if we seek to learn something of the background of Scripture, so that we can read it with the understanding of people who have applied their God-given intelligence to it.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *As you share in discussion with fellow Christians, try to find out what their troubles are, so that you can truly 'share them in Christ'. Have a go at this when you attend a worship service or meet with others for fellowship.*
 - *Pray for any you know who seem consumed by their suffering, or whose lives are blighted by the results of suffering. Pray for them and bless them in word and deed.*
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Final Prayer

We bless You Lord God and we give You thanks, for in Jesus Christ, You have endured pain and suffering so that we can be saved! May we therefore know for sure that no suffering in this world is ultimately without reason, and even if we cannot understand why dreadful things have happened, we will one day find our peace in You. You are the Saviour of the World, Lord Jesus Christ! AMEN
