

## Prayers

### Opening prayer

We adore You, Heavenly Father, and we praise You. You are the God who speaks to us through each sound we hear and touches us with every experience of the day. Please accept the offer of our heartfelt love and appreciation. We cannot thank You enough for the amazing grace of Jesus. Thank You, heavenly Father, AMEN

### Prayer Suggestions

**Prayer ideas**\_(Alternatives that can broaden the experience of prayer)

*Offer yourself to the Lord unreservedly and ask Him to bless each part of your day. Be specific and do not hold back on any negative feelings; He knows them already and wants to help you find a place of peace*

#### **On-going prayers**

- **Pray for your neighbourhood.** *Pray about the boundaries between people's property and living area. These boundaries can be the source of difficult disputes, so pray that people will respect boundaries*
- *Pray for those who are in prison, pray that they will be served well and enables to change their lives for the better*
- *Give thanks to God for sport and for entertainment, and for all that excites and thrills the soul*

### Meditation

Show us something of Yourself, Lord God.

Show us Creation in all its great splendour;  
Show us Salvation in all its awesome power;  
Show us Redemption in all its grace and love;  
Show us Holiness in all its true magnificence;  
Show us Faith in all its fruitfulness and joy  
Show us Hope in all its trust and aspiration;  
Show us Love in all its peace and contentment;

Show us Jesus Christ, for He is all these things, for us.

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## Bible Study

### Bible passage – 1 Corinthians 2:1-5

<sup>1</sup> When I came to you, fellow believers, I did not come proclaiming the evidence of God to you in high sounding words or wisdom. <sup>2</sup> For I decided to know nothing whilst I was with you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified, <sup>3</sup> and I came to you in weakness, in fear and in much trembling. <sup>4</sup> My speech and my preaching were not given with the persuasiveness of wisdom, but by proof of the Spirit and in power, <sup>5</sup> so that you might not place your faith in human wisdom but in the power of God.

### Review

The opening of chapter 2 of 1 Corinthians is Paul's passionate defence of both the Gospel he preached and his right to correct the Corinthian church. He refers back to what happened when he first came to Corinth to preach the Gospel, and speaks about his own sense of trepidation at the task (2:3). Now this sounds strange, for we do not think of Paul has been anything other than a confident and powerful preacher. We should however be more understanding, for the task being one of the first to preach the Gospel undoubtedly carried great stress. Suffice to say that out of his weakness, Paul was able to make a powerful and

important point from his recollection of his first preaching in Corinth. He declares boldly that God can do works of great power through even weak servants and difficult circumstances. Salvation is made available through the Cross of Christ, and the Gospel is made powerful through the 'folly' of preaching (1:21, 2:3,4).

Paul was right to challenge the Corinthians. In moving words, he reminds them that he had come with one message only, and this was the message of the Gospel by which they were saved. He said, '*I decided to know nothing whilst I was with you except Christ and Him crucified*' (2:2). After his attack on the Corinthians for their 'party spirit' (1:10-17), Paul did not intend to make the situation worse by creating further splits and focussing on himself. He made his points by appealing to the Gospel itself, to Christ crucified, and the power of God at work amongst His people (2:4,5).

It is remarkable that from the midst of such circumstances, this passage yields an abundance of fascinating and rich comment on the Gospel. Paul does not so much denounce human wisdom here, rather, he simply makes it plain that the things of God are of a different order. Reasoning cannot account for what Jesus Christ has done for all people on the Cross (2:1,2), the only explanation for it is the powerful work of God to redeem His people according to His will.

Then in verse 2, Paul reminds the Corinthians of the basic message of the Gospel he first preached. His words are a powerful challenge, which confronts the preacher of the Gospel with a challenge to keep the message of Christ crucified at the heart of evangelistic preaching. If the message of Christ crucified was the one that enabled the Early Church to grow, surely it is also the message God will use to speak to all people everywhere of all times.

Lastly, Paul appeals to the activity of the Spirit, by saying that the success of the Gospel is always a function of the work of God's Spirit, and not the apparent power or eloquence of a speaker. Again, this does not mean to say that the preacher should not apply every form of intelligence and discipline to the art of preaching. Rather, it reminds even the most eloquent that without a clear understanding of what God is doing by his Spirit, all efforts are in vain.

We are not in a position to argue with Paul about the effectiveness of the Gospel he preached or the evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit wherever he founded churches. The history of the world is clear enough to us now, giving testimony to the fact that in its early days the church grew with extraordinary vitality and power wherever Paul was preaching Christ crucified. Moreover, the simplicity of this Gospel stands in contrast to the ever increasing complexity of the Roman Empire, and we would be wise not to forget this.

For the world in which we live today is also increasingly complicated, and it seems to many that if any message is to be communicated then it requires great application and care. Speakers must be trained, every modern form of communication must be explored, and the message must be carefully packaged to ensure that people of different cultures can understand its meaning!

Let us be careful, for although it may not seem like this to us now, something similar could have been said in the days of the Roman Empire. Yet God worked in power to establish His church in the first century A.D. with a straightforward message of salvation through the Cross of Christ alone. Of course, early Christians would surely have spent time discussing the many different aspects of their faith, but without this Gospel, they were not 'saved'. The same is true for us.

## Going Deeper

- Translation notes on verse 1: 'proclaiming the evidence of God ...'
- Translation notes on verse 4: 'with the persuasiveness of wisdom'
- The background to Paul's preaching at Corinth
- The Gospel, and Paul's skill as a preacher

### ***Translation notes on verse 1: 'proclaiming the evidence of God ...'***

There is a real problem in this verse. The earliest manuscripts available to us contain two different possibilities for the word I have translated 'evidence'. Roughly half of the manuscripts use the Greek word 'marturion', which means 'evidence' or 'testimony'; and roughly half of the manuscripts use the Greek word 'mysterion', which means 'mysteries'. The different Bible translations available to us today are equally divided, because scholars cannot agree upon which is right and which is one.

My opinion is this. The oldest full manuscript of the New Testament is the famous fourth century 'Codex Sinaiticus', stored in London, and there is evidence in the margin of someone correcting the text from 'evidence' to 'mysteries'. However, the word 'evidence' is found in the oldest available papyrus containing 1 Corinthians (the famous 'Chester Beatty' papyri, 'p45' and 'p46' from the second century AD). It seems that someone became confused about these two similar Greek words at an early stage of copying the new Testament, and sought to change the text. Subsequently, nearly all the later Bible copies from Bristol fourth century onwards have the translation open 'mysteries'. On balance, I reckon it's more likely that Paul used the word 'evidence'.

### ***Translation notes on verse 4: 'with the persuasiveness of wisdom'***

There is another disagreement between the ancient manuscripts here. Some give the words as I have translated, and others add the Greek for 'words', giving a translation something like this, 'with the persuasive words of wisdom'. Fortunately, the difference in meaning between these translations is hardly significant, but in order to be consistent with my argument for the translation verse one, I have given a translation that is consistent with the older 'Chester Beatty' papyri.

### ***The background to Paul's preaching at Corinth***

The circumstances of the foundation of the Corinthian church are recorded in Acts 18. However, if we are to understand what happened at that time, we must look back into Paul's prior visit to Athens. In Athens, Paul famously challenged the Greek philosophers to consider that their 'unknown god' was in fact the Creator of the World (Acts 17:22-31). To this day, Paul's sermon at Athens is applauded as an example of good 'contextualised' preaching, that is, preaching that is moulded to the circumstance in which Paul preached.

However, we must be careful. If we read the account in Acts, we will discover that Paul was deeply dissatisfied with the consequences of his sermon. Having been dismissed from the Areopagus (Acts 17:32, 33), Paul immediately left for Corinth. He did not spend time in Athens establishing a church, rather he spent time in Corinth as a tentmaker, as it says, '*reasoning in the synagogues trying to persuade Jews and Greeks*' (Acts 18:4). Clearly something very interesting was going on in Paul's heart, for after a brief dispute with a Jew (Acts 18:5,6), the Spirit led Paul to make a radical decision about his ministry. He decided to abandon any further attempts to argue about the Gospel particularly with the Jewish people, saying, '*I am clear of my responsibility. From now on I will go to the Gentiles*' (Acts 18:6). Paul left the synagogue in Corinth and began thereafter to preach the Gospel to Gentiles with a new freedom and directed by God's Spirit.

All of this is clear evidence that around this time, Paul made a radical change in his preaching. Remarkably, his sermon at the Areopagus in Athens did not mention Jesus Christ at all (Acts 17:22-31), and the evidence from Scripture is that there were no converts in Athens. Paul seems to have been deeply unhappy with this, as is illustrated by what happened next. For the Spirit led him to preach with renewed zeal at Corinth, and the evidence from our passage today, is that he returned to the heart of the Gospel, which is Cross of Christ. It is not surprising therefore, that as we read in the book of Acts, Paul was able to found a church in Corinth but not in Athens. The preaching of the cross of Christ was the difference between his evangelistic efforts in Athens and in Corinth.

### ***The Gospel, and Paul's skill as a preacher***

It has sometimes been suggested that Paul manipulated the truth a little for the sake of making a good point. It certainly seems that the success of Paul's preaching was surely in no small part to do with his personal abilities. For example, was it not a very clever turn of phrase to minimise his own preaching in order to give glory to Christ (2:2,3)? Was all this not a means of confronting the Corinthians with their problems and an attempt to ensure that they could not attack Paul in return?

This is perhaps too cynical; the story of Paul's mission is not one of the serene progress of a competent missionary. As we have seen, he was plagued with occasional difficulties and had to work them out before God, just like any Christian. Of course, Paul was not one to be shy of using all the techniques and skills of his own day in speaking and writing, according to his considerable abilities. However, the evidence of his humility is found not just in his own writing, it is found within the story of his work in Acts, as we have seen above.

Throughout the book of Acts, we read about his impressive work and Luke quote some of his great speeches, though it sometimes suggests that in his day, people thought that others had better powers of speech (see Acts 18:24-28). It is safe to assume therefore that although Paul was indeed well versed in the skills of preaching and communication, he was like every human being, aware of his limitations. He is an example to all preachers when he shows that he is both self-aware and also conscious of his supreme debt to the power of the Spirit, who used his words for the furtherance of the Gospel. Ultimately, Paul's sole aim was to preach the Gospel of '*Christ and Him crucified*' (2:2).

The success of his preaching after the experience of Athens was considerable. After founding the church in Corinth, Paul preached powerfully in the region of Ephesus (19:1f.) and it is reported that God did '*extraordinary miracles*' through Paul (Acts 19:11). He was also more distinctly aware of the leading of God's Spirit in His mission (19:21f.) and subsequently embarked on some of his most dangerous exploits as a missionary (Acts 20f.). In his submission to the Lord after the difficulties in Athens, Paul was liberated in preaching and mission.

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## **Discipleship**

### **Application**

#### ***The journey of the preacher***

All preachers travel a spiritual journey as they preach; if they do not, they can become stuck in their ways and their faith. The lesson is surely that whilst it remains important to learn the task and become familiar with the disciplines of effective communication, the Christian preacher must always submit to the priority of the Gospel and the message of 'Christ and Him crucified', to the point that all else is secondary.

### ***Evidence of the power of the Gospel***

How do we know that our preaching is right before God and how do we know whether we measure up to the call of God in communicating the Gospel? To answer this is found partly in verses 4 and 5; Paul says, '*my speech and my preaching were not given with the persuasiveness of wisdom, but by proof of the spirit and in power*'. What does he mean by this?

The best evidence we have of what Paul meant may be found in the book of Acts. After preaching in Corinth and starting a church there in difficult circumstances, Paul moved on to Ephesus (Acts 19:1f.) Whilst there, Paul had to introduce the believers to the idea that they were supposed to be people through from God was at work by his Spirit. Consequently, Acts records that, *God did extraordinary miracles through Paul*' (Acts 19:11). This report from the book of Acts verifies what Paul says here about the 'proof' of the gospel and the work of the Spirit in power (2:4). So the conclusion we must draw is that when the Gospel should have been preached, we must expect the Spirit to work amongst God's people in power.

Now, some have suggested that part of the response to preaching is merely crowd hysteria on the part of spiritually needy people. However, most people know the difference between genuine responses and false ones, and if they do not spot them at the time, they will welcome knowing the difference once this is pointed out. Despite such misrepresentations, people's lives are changed Sunday by Sunday and day by day as preachers expound 'Christ crucified' today in thousands of different settings around the world. This is evidence that the Spirit is working in power through godly preaching, and no Christian should be embarrassed or ashamed of it. Our faith is not 'in human wisdom' but 'in the power of God'.

### ***The dangers of worshipping the preacher not the message***

In every age and generation, Christians can be tempted to admire those who have the ability to preach and explain the Gospel. In our own day, there is a dangerous tendency for people to worship the preacher instead of the message. I know something of this myself, for I have sometimes listened to preachers and been envious of their abilities, instead of being thankful to God and be content to submit my own efforts to Him.

Of course, most who hear such a suggestion will feel offended, but I write this to point out the dangers of such attitudes, just as Paul wrote to warn the Corinthians not to engage in a party spirit but be focused on Christ. The devil will always tend to cause people to take their eyes away from the truth is that the Gospel, and the growth of the Kingdom. Let us therefore make sure that in all we do within the life of the church, we look for the work of the Spirit as evidence of God's work and blessing in our midst.

## Questions for groups

1. What does this passage say to you about the Gospel, how it is preached and how it is received?
2. What does the phrase '*high sounding words of wisdom*' bring to mind, and how does this detract from the preaching of Christ crucified?
3. In the life of your church, how is the Gospel shown through works of power?

## Discipleship challenges

- *Recall the most recent sermon you have heard. What was the message and what did the Lord say to you through that service? Has this had any impact on your life? What reasons do you have for going to church if you have not heard God speaking to you and guiding you? Explore your reasons for going to church.*
- *Write down what you would say to someone who asks you what you believe about Jesus, and base this on 'Christ crucified'. Imagine that someone who is very sceptical has asked you this question, and you need to defend your faith well.*

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## Final Prayer

Lord God, You see far beyond our sight, You hear above our hearing, and You speak words beyond our understanding. Yet, through our Saviour Jesus, we are privileged to see You, to hear You, and to speak with you; for in Him, Your re-creative power has given us new life! Thank You Lord God. AMEN

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