

Prayers

Opening prayer

Deliver us, O Lord, from everything and anything that clouds our understanding of You. We know we cannot see you in Your glory and majesty until the end of time, but we cannot be satisfied until we have explored every means to know more of You. We have a thirst to do Your will and this will never be quenched until we see You in glory either on this earth or in the highest heavens. We praise You, Glorious Lord. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

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

When you pray, remember that you are joining together with millions of people who are the Lord's own people in our generation. Give thanks for all of them.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for those who work with the text of Scripture.** *Pray for those who work to translate the Bible into all the different languages of the world; a task that is still yet to be completed*
- *Give thanks to God for His mercies in keeping you safe while you travel*
- *Pray for all who are in prison, especially those who know they have done wrong and want to be better people.*

Meditation

Dear Jesus, You are our help and our comfort,
Assist us again, for we need You.

When suffering and distress enwrap our souls,
Cover us over with love and care.

When worry and anxiety eat at our hearts,
Robe us with the comforts of peace.

When fear and dread fill our stumbling emotions,
Surround us by Your guardian angels.

When panic and horror take a grip on our minds,
Wrap us around with Your mercy.

When misery and pain engulf our spirits,
Clothe us with the righteousness of Christ.

Dear Jesus, You are our help and our comfort,
Your power is sufficient for our needs!

Bible Study

Bible passage – 1 Corinthians 4: 6-13

⁶ Now I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, fellow believers, so that you may learn from us not to go beyond what is written, and so that none of you will take unnecessary pride in one over against the other. ⁷ Who passes judgement on you? What do you have that you have not received? Also, if you received it, why do you boast as if it was not something received?

⁸ You already have sufficient! Already you have prospered! Without us, you have become kings, though I wish you really did rule so that we might be kings with you! ⁹ For I imagine that God has placed us apostles last of all, as those condemned to death, for we have been made into a show for the world to see for angels and people alike. ¹⁰ We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are respected, and we are despised! ¹¹ Up to this very moment we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are roughly treated, and we are homeless; ¹² we grow weary working with our own hands. Being cursed, we bless; being persecuted, we endure, ¹³ being slandered, we beg to be heard. At this very moment, we have become like the rubbish of the world, the scum of the universe.

Review

It is fairly clear that in this passage of 1 Corinthians, Paul expressed a considerable amount of frustration, and no dressing up of the passage or skilful use of words in translation can cover up the fact that he appears quite emotional at the end. The fact was that Paul's own name had been dragged into the world of divisions and splits at Corinth, and it was not easy for him to write to the church there. He had founded the church, but after he had left, the people there had taken great liberties with the Gospel they had received and were unwilling to be corrected. If we read between the lines of Paul's letter, we find comments that suggest the Corinthians were unwilling to receive any further teaching or advice (2:1-5, 3:1f., 4:8); but Paul was determined to destroy this root of evil within the church.

Each one of us knows what it is like to feel rejected, and each one of us responds to rejection in one of a number of ways; for example, by fighting back, withdrawing into ourselves or striving to do better. Paul was no exception, and his letter is an example of someone fighting back against wrongs. More than this, Paul was fighting back against wrongs done not just to him, but to God and the Gospel (4:1-5); it is not surprising therefore that Paul gets emotional.

To begin with, verse six briefly refers back to our reading yesterday, but goes on to make two points, each of which are important for God's divided people today. Firstly, he urges the Corinthians not to go '*beyond what is written*' (4:6), by which he means the Old Testament of the Bible. Throughout his letter, Paul has emphasised the fact that God has revealed His plan of salvation through prophets, and no one can claim any merit for discovering anything new about it; the merit for salvation all belongs to Christ (2:1-10, 3:10-15).

Next, Paul warned against the '*unnecessary pride*' that had crept into the life of the divided church at Corinth (4:6). Now the different groups there each glorified one or other famous leader (1:10) and the nuances of their teaching, but Paul pointed out that to do this was to place personal opinion above the Gospel itself! He was aghast. The Corinthians had already received the Gospel and been saved; what more did they want (4:7)? What further teaching could be worth more to the Corinthians than the Gospel by which they were saved (4:7)?

At this point, Paul's emotions come to the fore, and he begins to reveal his own thoughts and feelings, and he responds to the slight on his person and work of such beliefs and attitudes. The Corinthians were acting as if there was no authority other than themselves (4:8,9), which is what Paul means by his expression '*to rule as Kings*' found in verse 8, though he speaks with understandable sarcasm! By claiming to be self-sufficient, the Corinthians had created for themselves a church system in which there was no need for people such as he; the dramatic and apostolic work of extending the Kingdom of God was for them no more than a side show in the theatre of life. Now Paul may well have implied more than what the Corinthians actually believed, but he said this in order to draw out the true consequences of their beliefs.

Once roused, Paul continued to point out the uncomfortable logic behind the Corinthian's arrogance (4:10-13). These verses contain a remarkable series of brief and emotional comments about the considerable difficulties of Christian ministry in the first century A.D. At first, Paul sets this against the comfortable faith of the Corinthian church, for example, '*we are weak, but you are strong ...*' (4:10), but he quickly drops this, and focuses on the trials he has endured for the sake of the Gospel. Most Christians will recognise that what Paul writes here is reminiscent of Jesus' own teaching; for example, He calls on those who follow Him to '*pick up your Cross and follow me ...*' (Matt 10:38, Luke 9:23 etc.), and He prophesies that those who follow him will be persecuted (Matt 5:12). Paul may be speaking emotionally and with sarcasm, but his experiences are indeed a true reflection of Christian discipleship.

Those who first read these words would either have felt chastised, or been incensed. But although Paul was indeed emotional, he was not out of control. He frequently used his intellect and his knowledge of God's Word to press home his message; but here, he used his emotions. Verses 10 to 13 are an emotional appeal

to God's people to recognise that the Gospel is indeed all about Jesus Christ and the transforming power of His life and death.

Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of the passage
- The meaning of 'what is written' (4:6)
- What is received (4:7)
- Corinthian claims (4:8,9)
- The life of an apostle (4:10-13)

Notes on the translation of the passage

V6 'so that you may learn from us not to go beyond what is written'

This sentence is rather difficult to translate. The gist of it is fairly clear, but some scholars think that part of this is in fact a quote to which Paul is referring, as in the NIV version 'so that you may learn from us the meaning of the saying "Do not go beyond what is written".' The challenge for us to try and be clear about what Paul is saying is 'written' here, and how this fits with the flow of the text (see study).

V7 'For who passes judgement on you?'

This sentence is translated wildly differently in most translations, but this is the simplest translation, and it is both correct and entirely understandable (see study). Some feel that the verb here, which is a variant of 'judgement' should refer to perceived differences between people, hence the NRSV 'For who sees anything different in you?'

V9 'we have been made into a show for the world to see'

The apostles have been made into what the Greek calls 'theatron', into public theatre! Paul is here being very sarcastic, and objecting to the way that his own contribution to the Corinthian church is mere show, but has no substance (see study).

V13 'being slandered, we beg to be heard'

The last part of this phrase is often translated 'we speak kindly', and the Greek word is not easy to translate. However, it contains the sense of polite appeal, and I have tried to convey this in my translation. This is the true opposite of being slandered, an action which shows up the slander for what it is.

V13 'the scum of the universe'

The Greek here says 'the scum of all things'. However, in the context of all things, it is appropriate to translate 'universe' which captures the feeling of Paul's letter here. He is very offended.

The meaning of 'what is written' (4:6)

The phrase 'what is written' found in verse 6, is not straightforward. In the review above, I have simply stated that it refers to Scripture. The Greek words are in fact rather unclear and could refer either to scriptures, or to things Paul had previously written. The verse would make sense perfectly well if it was a warning from Paul that the Corinthians should not go further than the principles of gospel that he had put down in writing for them.

I have disregarded this idea for two reasons. Firstly, at no point in his first letter to the Corinthians does Paul set out the gospel in any consistent logical way, as he does in his letter to the Romans (chapters 1 to 5), or to the Ephesians (chapters 2 and 3). Secondly, the term 'what is written' is used elsewhere in Scripture to refer specifically to quotes from the Old Testament (see Luke 10:26, 22:37 etc.). I therefore suggest that Paul's comment here was therefore a warning to God's people to stick to scriptural principles, in this case, when dealing with the issues of leadership and division amongst God's people.

Scripture identifies God as the supreme and only leader of His people, and Israel was led variously by prophets priests and kings throughout its long history before the time of Christ. We tend to forget that for most of its history (apart from the time of Moses, Joshua, the Judges and David), the kingdoms of Israel and Judah were divided; and this was one of their failings (see 2 Kings 17). Paul was therefore appealing to the Corinthians to look into their own history and perceive the consequences of division, and learn from this. Ultimately, God has to send His divided people into exile, and punish them severely, before the prophet's dream of a united Israel is partially born again under Ezra and Nehemiah. If we do not know this story and

how it is shaped within the Old Testament, then we are doomed to repeat the failures of the past and continue in our divisions.

What is received (4:7)

In the next verse (4:7) continues in the same way, suggesting that the Corinthians be humble in view of the gift of faith and the gift of the Gospel. They had received these initially from Paul, and though he did not expect plaudits from them for being the evangelist who founded their church, he did expect that the Gospel and the faith would not be exploited and made into personal issues. To do this was to copy mistakes from the past and fail to learn from the experience of God's people in Old Testament times.

Corinthian claims (4:8,9)

The Corinthians were saying about themselves that they had 'sufficient' and had 'prospered' (see 4:8) and so needed no further assistance from an apostle. These words are important. The word for 'sufficient' (4:8) does not mean 'enough', as someone might say when they have eaten all they want; it means 'completely full'. Also, the word for 'prospered' is not one that suggests getting everything you want for the good life, it means more like 'all the riches of the world'! It appears that the Corinthians believed they had all they needed as Christians, and they could dispense with help or advice from others. This is a dangerous presumption for anyone.

In verse 8, Paul also uses word play on the idea of 'ruling'. It will help us to interpret this passage if we realise that the Greek word used here is that used for the absolute authority of a despot, not the natural authority of a parent in a household. It is unsurprising that this triggers his more sarcastic comments (from verse 9 onwards). It is totally inappropriate for Christians to assume absolute authority in anything, and far more appropriate for Christians to point to Christ in all things.

The sarcasm continues in verse 9, where Paul conjures up a picture of a theatrical procession in which the apostles who founded churches comes last. His point is clear enough, but imagine what you would feel like if you discovered that your church was split over some issue and your own name was linked to one position against that of others, and without you knowing it! Even if those who supported you were correct, you might feel somewhat 'used'. This is what Paul must have felt, whatever the issues that separated the different groups; he objected to his name being used in this way. It was a difficult issue for Paul, because some of those who took on his own name may well have fought for his views and said things in the church that he would have agreed with. Perhaps they were expecting a letter from him that exonerated them; but Paul did not do this, at least openly. Paul spoke what he believed to be the truth, without prejudice; from a human perspective, it was a difficult act to pull off.

The life of an apostle (4:10-13)

In the last section of our passage, Paul wrote a lengthy sequence of contrasts, explaining his position. The first thing he mentions is foolishness and wisdom (4:10), which has already been discussed extensively in this letter (2:1f.); but Paul goes on to say (4:11-13). He could have tried to gain some empathy from the church as the one who had brought the Gospel to Corinth, he was more interested in gaining sympathy for the true Gospel. Even though we cannot be sure about Paul's motives, what he said next was certainly passionate and challenging.

Paul reveals the massive contrast between the life of a travelling evangelist in the Roman Empire and those who lived in Corinth (4:10-13). The Corinthians lived within a part of the Roman world that was in the 'lap of luxury' in comparison to much of the rest of the known world, and few had travelled enough to be able to appreciate the differences between the extremes of life in the Roman Empire as Paul did. In stark contrast to their own experiences of life, Paul spoke of his own life, and the hardship to which he had become accustomed. If these things were news to the Corinthians then they had indeed lost touch with the world around them, and also the whole Gospel of God.

It is shocking to us to read that Paul lived at times in hunger or with rough treatment, or that he was cursed or persecuted, but we are blind if we do not know that such things happen today to many people who work for Christ in places where others have no regard for either Christianity or free speech. Perhaps the trouble with the Corinthians was that because they thought they were all sufficient in their own fellowship, they had no real experience of the rest of the Roman world and the life of those who lived elsewhere. I suspect that Paul wanted to educate them a little about this!

The most revealing part of the passage comes in verses 12 and 13, where Paul says 'being cursed, we bless; being persecuted, we endure; being slandered, we beg to be heard ...' Here, a spiritual truth emerges from the high emotion of the whole passage, which links Paul's words very closely with that of Christ. Paul spoke about a form of practical 'turning the other cheek' (see Matt 5:39) that is very costly. Who of us can bless when we are cursed, endure in the face of persecution or speak politely when we are being slandered! Yet this is the way of the Gospel, and after everything that had been said between Paul and the Corinthian

church, Paul felt confident in saying that he had done his best to stick to the hardest of all spiritual principles taught by Jesus. The reason for his writing was to challenge the Corinthians to do the same.

Discipleship

Application

- Expressing emotions
- Passing on the Gospel
- Living up to the standards of faith

Expressing emotions

There is something important about being able to demonstrate one's true feelings without allowing an expression of emotion to become too affecting. For when we lose control of our feelings, then we often say things we do not mean and add to confusion rather than help situations. Here, Paul was able to retain control of his emotions sufficient, in his judgement, to make some sharp points to the Corinthian church. Some who write about Paul's work here think that his emotional outburst goes too far, and they suggest that what he says in verses 11 to 13 is rather exaggerated. But who are we to say? We do not know Paul's life experience, and the fact that what he wrote has been accepted by the Church as a whole to be part of scriptures (that is, God's Word) suggests that from early days, those who read this letter accepted it.

In different cultures, the use of emotions is judged differently and expressed differently, but as Christians, we should not be ashamed to express our feelings about what it means to be one of Christ's servants. We cannot assume that our experience is the same as others, and we do not know what it is like for Christians in Iran, Egypt or Nepal and Borneo for example, if we live a comfortable life in the west. It is only when we share what life is really like that we honour Christ with our real testimony, and God will bless it. When Paul spoke as he did in this letter, it would not surprise me if he wondered how his words would be received; it was a risk exposing himself in this way. However, the Lord blessed his words, and now blesses us through them because they are in scripture.

Passing on the Gospel

In verse 7, Paul makes it clear that people are converted and come to faith because others pass on the gift of the Gospel of salvation to them. He brought the Gospel to Corinth, and the Corinthians had received the Gospel from him; he did not want them to thank him, but to accept that they owed a debt to the wider church, represented by the missionary work of Paul. The same is true for us. We have each received the Gospel because individuals, from our parents and friends to evangelists or ministers have been used by God to bring us the Gospel. It is surely our duty to give thanks not to them but for them, and part of this is to recognise that we need others and we need the ministry of a wide range of people in order to fulfil our calling to be the 'body of Christ'.

Living up to the standards of faith

All of us should ask ourselves whether we are indeed doing our best to live up to the highest standards of faith, including the teachings of Jesus. By this I mean, the love of others, believing in God and trusting in Him at all times, holding on to the hope of eternity in the midst of all circumstance, turning the other cheek, and much, much more. We all know a fair number of such essential teachings of the Christian faith, but can we testify that we keep them? All too often, we think we are behaving adequately when we aspire to the things of God, but we have not yet yielded all to the Lord or begun to walk towards fulfilling these ideals. Jesus always invites us to come closer.

Questions for groups

1. Discuss in your group this question. How much do we depend on others for what we believe, how much on what we work out for ourselves, and how much on the work of God?
2. Do you know that you have received everything necessary to be a Christian and claim eternal life? If not, what else is needed?
3. What hardships have you endured for the sake of Christ, and how has this affected your faith?

Discipleship challenges

- *Think carefully about your faith and your life as a Christian. Is it fair to say that you are content with these things or are you discontent? Give thanks to God for those things with which you are confident and ask Him to give you what you need to be confident of eternal life.*
 - *Have you ever felt deeply emotional in church, perhaps at some special service or some important event such as a baptism? Think back over recent times and ask God to remind you of what you felt and why. Emotions are an important guide to our spiritual lives, so yield them to the Lord.*
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Final Prayer

We give our thoughts and feelings to You, Lord Jesus. We ask You to help us make sense of all that is going on in our lives, and give us a Godly perspective on ourselves, our homes and families, and our work. Then, Lord Jesus, help us live in the light of Your guidance. AMEN
