

Prayer

Dear Lord and Father of all, we commit ourselves to You now with confidence and joy. Confidence, because we know that nothing can separate us from Your love; and joy because we know that you will never leave us and Your compassion is unfailing. Dear Lord, may we demonstrate our zeal for Jesus throughout our lives, and may the glory of true faith shine on our faces. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

(Offering alternatives that can broaden your experience of prayer)

Prayer ideas

After you have prayed, make a list of anything specific you have asked of the Lord, and during the day, watch out for the fulfilment of your requests, or any significant developments

On-going prayers

- **Pray for understanding between people of different backgrounds.** *Pray for understanding between those who live in cities and those who live in rural areas. Within most nations, such tensions lead to all manner of social and ethical difficulties*
- *Give thanks to God for the love He has shown you in the past few days, and do your best to sustain your praise throughout the day.*
- *Pray for those affected by the food poisoning problems currently spreading around Europe, especially for farmers whose products are wasted in the rush to find its source*

Meditation

Let us all rejoice in our faith

What a joy it is to be one who knows the amazing love of God;

What a delight it is to be someone who puts faith into practice;

What a privilege it is to be one who feels God's presence;

What a blessing it is to be a person who cares for others;

What an honour it is to be one who receives God's revelation;

What a challenge it is to be a preacher of the eternal Word;

What a witness it is to be one who can testify to God's salvation;

What a test it is to pioneer the work of the Gospel within the world;

Let us all be ready to do God's will.

Bible passage - 1 Corinthians 1:1-3

¹ Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and Sosthenes our brother:

² to the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are set apart in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, with all people who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ in every circumstance, their Lord and ours:

³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Bible Study

Review

The first letter of Paul to the Corinthians is undoubtedly one of the most famous of Paul's letters, and second only to Romans in length. But where Romans was clearly written to be a general explanation of the Gospel, 1 Corinthians was written just like many other letters, with a specific purpose in mind. Paul wrote to the Corinthians to offer them advice about the life of the church, and sometimes he answers some contentious points put to him by the church (for example, 7:1 – '*now for the matters you wrote about ...*' and goes on to talk about marriage). Probably the most memorable feature of the letter is Paul's famous description of love found in chapter 13, widely known as the 'Hymn of Love'. It is an unparalleled piece of literature in any language, and it has always challenged God's people to remember that 'love' lies at the heart of the Gospel.

Paul had been the first to preach the Gospel in the great port of Corinth towards the end of his second missionary journey (Acts 18:1f.) and it was immediately clear that the work there would be significant. The Lord Jesus appeared there to Paul in a vision (Acts 18:9,10) telling him not to be afraid but to minister to those who needed his teaching and support. The report in Acts says that Paul spent a '*considerable time*' in Corinth (Acts 18:18) before moving on to Ephesus and then Antioch. Whilst there, Paul was hauled before the pro-consul Gallio by the Jews, on a charge of perverting Roman laws on religion (Acts 18:12f.). When Gallio refused to hear the accusation, the Jews vented their fury on the synagogue ruler called Sosthenes (Acts 18:17). From our passage today, it seems that this same man Sosthenes left Corinth to become a companion of Paul, hence his inclusion in the greetings at the beginning of this letter (1:1).

The second verse of this passage is a polite introduction to the letter (1:2) in which Paul lists the people to whom he was speaking. If you read some of Paul's other letters, you will find that this is a normal feature of his letters. The letter to the Romans begins with a very clear address to the Christians in Rome, for example, and the letters to the Philippians and the Colossians, Paul famously begins with a prayer for those who will receive the letter. However, this verse contains a clear message to the Corinthian church about holiness and also the wider church; he stresses that the church is '*set apart ... and called to be holy*', and also that he is writing to the Corinthians and '*all those who call on the name of our Lord Jesus ...*' (1:2). Why does Paul write in this way to the church at Corinth?

As we delve deeper into 1 Corinthians, we will find that these are important themes for the whole letter. Paul wanted the Corinthians to know that they were no isolated church doing whatever they wanted. They were a part of God's church, that is, all of God's people who owned His name; he emphasises this at the end of verse 2, describing Jesus as '*their Lord and ours*' (1:2).

The Corinthian church was also beginning to have problems with people who thought that they were better Christians than others, and we will soon read about Paul's concern about the divisiveness of such presumptions (1:10f.). So right at the beginning of his letter, Paul purposefully flags up the crucial issue of holiness, and with relatively few words, he emphasises that the holiness of God's people is no personal possession or the result of merit. No one who reads Paul's letter to the Corinthians can be in any doubt that he believed all God's people to be truly interdependent upon each other (see chapter 12 about the 'body').

Our reading finishes with Paul's famous greeting; '*grace ... and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*' However, 'grace' and 'peace' are not merely warm words; nor are they mere politeness with which to banter. They speak powerfully of the unity of God's people, who are one in Him who died for the salvation of all who will believe in Him. Those who are saved have 'peace' with God because of the 'grace' of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at:

- The call of Paul
- The church at Corinth
- The call to holiness
- All ... in every circumstance
- Grace and Peace

Notes on the text and translation

V1 'to be an apostle ...'

The call of Paul is to be an apostle. The word means 'sent', but in its day, this was linked to the Jewish idea of one who travelled to negotiate deals on behalf of a landowner or trader, and would have full powers of negotiation and authority to act for the person represented. In English we sometimes use the word 'plenipotentiary' for this role.

V2 'to the church of God ...'

The famous word for church 'ecclesia' was used in the Greek version of the Old Testament to refer to the 'assembly' of God's people of Israel when gathered together for some purpose. For Paul, the church was the assembly of God's new people of Israel (see study).

V2 'with all people ...'

Most translations have 'together with all people ...' but there is no 'together' in Greek; simply 'with'. This may not appear to make much difference to the translation, but it takes away any over emphasis on this part of the verse, and allows us to see the significance of other parts of the sentence, see next point.

V2 '... in every circumstance ...'

Here, the Greek words 'topos' is usually translated 'place', giving the phrase '... in every place ...' I have preferred the term 'circumstance' because the Greek word does not describe geographical place alone, but something like a 'place' in a book, or an 'occasion'. Because it has such a loose meaning, it is best to avoid limiting it to the idea of geography.

V2 'their Lord and ours;'

In this phrase the word 'Lord' does not appear in the Greek. However, the literal Greek phrase 'theirs and ours' lacks a subject, and although it is clear in Greek that the subject is the Lord, we have to put the word 'Lord' into the sentence so that the English phrase makes sense.

Going Deeper

In going deeper, we will study each verse in turn, and especially the three main phrases in verse 2. In addition, you will find that the notes on the text and translation will help you understand more about the text. There are one or two surprises for us if we are prepared to look further than the surface of this great text.

The call of Paul

Paul was always distinctly aware of his personal call to do the 'will' of God. In most of his letters you can find a few sentences at least of justification of call (see Gal 1:11f., Eph 3 etc.). Later on in his letter, Paul had to defend his status as an apostle and evangelist against particularly pernicious attitudes that had arisen within the church (see 1 Cor. 1:10f.), but here, he simply claimed as he did in many other letters, that he was commissioned as an apostle. This sounds relatively straightforward to us, but we must remember that in the early days of the church, the 'Apostles' were regarded as that specific group of people who had been personal witnesses to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and had received the personal commission from him (Matt 28:19) to establish the church. Paul was not one of these, but claimed that Jesus had appeared to him personally to join this creative task in establishing the church (see Gal 2:1-10). This is a reminder to us that although God requires His people to live according to discipline, He is always willing to take us beyond what we think He has revealed. It is generally true of the history of the church that God has often used people at the very edges of normal church life to be the central figures in His greater works of renewal.

The notes (above) remind us that the word 'apostle' is more powerful than we often think. In its day, the word was used to refer to someone who had total authority to act for the master. We must accept that Paul was indeed a unique individual who was used by God to create many of the new churches that would form the nucleus of the early church as it spread outwards from Jerusalem. The word 'apostle' reminds us that Paul had been commissioned by the Lord Jesus especially for this task, and also to write letters that have become our scriptures. The reference to the 'will of God' reminds us that what Paul did was in obedience to the special and specific will of God for those times. Just like Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, Paul knew that he had to do God's will.

The church at Corinth

The Corinthian church was formed when the Gospel was preached. It was not easy, for Paul became annoyed by the opposition of Jews and 'shook the dust from his feet' (Acts 18:6) in protest at their obstructions to the Gospel. It was only the reassurance of the Lord Jesus in a vision that kept Paul there (Acts 18:9f.), but by not walking away, Paul persisted according to God's will to found a powerful and significant church.

The word used for church in Greek is 'ecclesia' from which we get the word 'ecclesiastical'. This word was used extensively in the 'Septuagint' Old Testament (a version of the Old Testament translated into Greek for readers from the second century BC to Paul's day and beyond). In the Septuagint, 'ecclesia' was used to translate the Hebrew word 'assembly' in the specific sense of the assembly of God's people Israel. Just as we know today that when someone says 'let's go to church', then it means attending worship in a local

church, Jews in Paul's day all knew that the 'ecclesia' meant not just a general assembly, but the assembly of God's people, the Jews. It was a word normally used for Jews and proselytes (converts to Judaism) who came to Jerusalem for the special feasts of Passover or Atonement, for example. It is quite remarkable therefore that Paul tore this word away from this setting and used it to refer to God's new Israel, the gathered 'church' of God.

It is tragic that the word 'church' today has bad press. We have become confused about church as people or buildings, for example, when it really means the total gathered people of God who believe in His work through Jesus Christ and have been saved! What a privilege it is to be a member of God's church!

The call to holiness

The central phrase of verse 2 is this; 'those who are set apart in Christ Jesus and called to be holy'. Of course, 'set apart' and 'holy' both come from the same Greek word, so the verse could be translated like this; 'those who are set apart (holy) ... and are called to be set apart (holy)'. When put like this, we can see that in this phrase, Paul addresses those who have become what they have been called by Christ to be; that is, set apart, or holy. Many are called to follow Christ, but not all people who are called follow Him and do what He says. A true Christian is one who is both called and has done what Christ has told them to do; in other words, being a Christian is a matter of responding to Christ's call by faith and also putting that faith into practice through practical obedience to God's will.

The first call placed upon a convert in the days of the early church was that they should undergo the discipline of baptism. It was not just a delightful experience in front of friends and relatives (as we so often try to make it today), but a taxing process of learning about the faith and making public testimony to Jesus Christ, often in front of people who found such beliefs quite objectionable. A member of the church was someone who had been baptised into the fellowship of all believers, often at great personal cost; they were holy to God and set apart for the work of the Gospel, and they knew it. We do well to follow their example.

All ... in every circumstance

The reasons why I have translated this part of verse 2 are given in the text and translation notes above. Paul was deeply conscious of the unity of all God's people, and this was inbuilt into all the letters he wrote. Those who had become Christians in Corinth were not different, in his eyes, from any other Christians anywhere else in the world, even though the world was somewhat more insular then than now. There are plenty of stories, not in the Bible, from the days of the early church of groups of people calling themselves Christians and forming their own beliefs about God and Jesus which bore little resemblance to what we read about in the New Testament today. Unfortunately, people to this day tend to want to do things in their own ways in their own places; however, Paul would have none of it.

Paul was absolutely committed to the total unity of all God's people in Christ, and the logical and practical unity of those who believe as like a 'body' (1 Cor 12), indeed, the body of Christ. His words 'with all people who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ ...' is the beginning of His definition of those who constitute the one universal church of God; it is a good start for any definition we might like to give today. The main interest in the latter part of verse 2 comes with the use of the word 'topos', which as I have explained above, refers to people not just in all places, but in every kind of situation. As soon as we think about this, it makes sense. Paul was not just interested in the unity of all Christians who lived in all places, but the unity of all Christians whatever their personal circumstances. This is an important point, for today, people make all kinds of personal excuses for belonging to this church or that largely because of personal preference. From a scriptural point of view, this will not do. We are not at liberty to pick and choose our church; we are part of one 'people of God' and whilst we may choose to be part of this local expression of the church or that, we are all fundamentally one in Christ. Personally, I am not convinced of the acceptability of any church that will not have anything to do with other Christians. The whole idea flatly contradicts scripture.

Grace and Peace

Paul's great greeting 'grace and peace', towers above the whole passage, reminding us of the great themes of Christian faith that have unified God's people for centuries. The word 'grace' was a Greek form of greeting common on the highways and byways of the Roman Empire amongst peoples of all races; and the word 'peace' was a distinctively Semitic and Jewish greeting common in the eastern world and amongst Jews in particular. By using the words 'grace and peace', Paul spoke out an example of the unity in Christ that lay behind what he had previously said (1:2), for the words united Gentile and Jew, together breaking the barriers of race that threatened briefly to halt the growth of the early church.

But as I have already explained, the words mean far more than this. Paul did not use them merely to make a racial point, and anyone who asked Paul why he greeted them with these words set themselves up for an explanation of the Gospel! We can imagine Paul greeting someone in this way, only for them to reply 'what does this mean?' Paul then had every opportunity to explain the costly grace of God in Jesus Christ, and the peace with God which He won for all humanity by His death on the Cross! This is evangelism made simple!

But we should never forget that Paul always spoke about a costly grace and an indestructible and eternal peace; 'grace and peace' was never a mere greeting, it was and still can be, a powerful statement of faith.

Application

Why is it that we can find so much from so such a small text? It is because Paul began his letters carefully, using words to help his readers understand what he was saying clearly. Often, we listen to people we know and find far more in what they say than the mere words; the mode of speech, the use of one word rather than another or the manner of expression tells us a great deal about the nature of the communication. Indeed, we can respond to what someone says with some emotion such as anger or joy before the other party has even indicated their own feelings!

So it is with reading a letter such as this; Paul's motives in writing the letter gradually become clear. He is concerned about the unity of the church and the understanding God's people have of the central significance of their call to holiness, and the grace of Christ and the peace of God. As the letter continues we will discover more about these things and more, but at the least, we are reminded that Paul's concern for the life of the church in his own day is echoed in our experience today.

Without doubt, we live in a day when God's people are not unified, and matters of faith are debated rather than accepted; indeed, there are some parts of the church today where people would find the idea that Christians are in some way different from others quite scandalous. Some of my own views have been expressed within the study already, but all of us who study God's word should be challenged by the forthright and clear manner of Paul's writing and the pure logic of His theology. Certainly, Paul can become rather difficult to understand when we read some of his more difficult writings, but there can be little doubt about his challenge to all God's people to recognise their unity in Christ. With every Christian whose eyes are opened to glories and the truth of the universal church and the true nature of the holy 'body of Christ', heaven is the richer.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Are there such a thing as apostles today? Discuss in your group what you mean by the job title 'apostle'.
2. How can God's people be united today? What will it take for people of faith to overcome the barriers that exist between the churches?
3. What do the words 'grace' and 'peace' mean to people today, particularly those outside the church. Should Christians use them as a greeting today?

Personal comments by author

I have often written about the subject of Christian unity, because I find it hard to write about the Bible and not find myself constantly coming back to this theme. I do not know how people manage to avoid it! I have even heard sermons on the 'body of Christ' in 1 Corinthians 12 that emphasise the separate parts, appearing to argue that God's people are at their best when functioning apart! For my part, I cannot stand back from this major theme of the Bible. It comes up in almost every significant theological statement found in the Bible; God's people are intended to be one and it makes a mockery of the principle if it is not intended to be shown to the world in some way rather than ignored and 'spiritualised'.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- **Something to do:** Try attending the meetings and worship services of some other churches, not to try and make a point to others, but to help yourself become familiar with the worship of other Christians.
- **Something to do:** Talk to people you know who do not go to church, and ask them what they think about the fact that there are different churches and denominations. Ask them whether they would be interested if there was in fact only one church, and see where the discussion takes you.

Final Prayer

Dear Lord and Father of all, forgive Your people their sins, in particular their sins of ignorance and selfishness. Help us to yield our passions and interests to You, so that we may become true servants of the Kingdom, and not slaves to our own church structures; through Jesus Christ we pray: AMEN
