

## Prayers

### Opening prayer

All praise be to You Living Lord, for in my darkest depths You lift my soul, and from my deepest despair You raise me up. Remind me daily of Your power to save, Lord God, so that I never forget the wonder of Your grace and the provision You have made for my life. I thank You, Lord Jesus; I thank you from the very depths of my heart, and I praise You: AMEN

### Prayer Suggestions

General theme for the week: action

**1. For yourself**

*Ask the Lord to help you do the things that are before you to do. Everyone has a list of things to do, how long is yours? Submit it to the Lord*

**2. For your friends and family**

*Some of the things you need to do relate to your home and to your friends and family, so pray about this and ask the Lord to help you get a perspective on what you need to do*

**3. For the church and its work**

*Pray that God's people will accept their responsibility to be workers in the Lord's harvest, so ask the Lord to help your church fellowship fulfil its evangelistic mission*

**4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)**

*Pray for some of the things you hear about in the news, and where possible, use the internet to respond to them, by either joining a forum to discuss a subject, sending an email to a parliamentary representative, or other such action*

### Meditation

The freshness of each new day reveals the blessings of the Lord  
And the gifts He gives to those who receive them and use them:

The offer of precious moments spent in reading the Word;  
The challenge of sustaining the work He has given us to do;  
The chance to be creative in the path of discipleship and faith;  
The excitement of knowing the Lord has more for us each day;  
The valuable moments of quiet peace which refresh the soul;  
The freedom of praying, to bless other people and the world;  
The honour of living the life of Christ, and helping the poor;  
The opportunity to love again, where yesterday we failed;

How can we show gratitude for the privileges we have been given?  
Except in loving the Lord our God and doing what He has called us to do.

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## Bible Study

### Bible passage – 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

<sup>1</sup> Fellow believers, I now remind you of the Gospel I preached to you, which you received, and in which you now stand, <sup>2</sup> and through which you are saved, that is, if you are holding fast to the message I preached to you, and have not believed in vain. <sup>3</sup> For I handed on to you as of primary importance what I also received:

Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, <sup>4</sup> He was buried, and was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, <sup>5</sup> and He appeared to Cephas and then to the twelve. <sup>6</sup> After this, He appeared to more than five hundred believers at one time, most of whom are still living, though some have died, <sup>7</sup> and then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles.

<sup>8</sup> Then last of all, he appeared also to me, as to one of untimely birth. <sup>9</sup> For I am the least of the apostles, one who is not worthy to be called an apostle because I persecuted the church of God. <sup>10</sup> But I am what I am by the grace of God, and His grace toward me has not been without purpose; indeed, I worked harder than any of them, though not I, but the grace of God within me. <sup>11</sup> So whether it was I or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you believe.

## Review

Throughout his letter to the Corinthians, Paul has dealt with a number of contentious issues. Most recently, he has tackled the worship life of the church, especially the gifts of tongues and prophecy (see chapter 14). He has one more subject to deal with before the letter finally concludes, which is the resurrection of the dead. In the first century, as well as our own day, Christian faith stands and falls on its belief in God's power to raise people from the dead and grant eternal life. Many people have difficulty believing this because of the self-centredness and scepticism of life today, but as we will soon find, the reasons for doubting this were quite different in the first century. Nevertheless, Paul knew that scepticism about the resurrection was something that could tear at the very heart of Christian faith, because it denied the work of Jesus Christ on the Cross, and he was determined to fight against it.

The full weight of his arguments about the resurrection come later on in chapter 15, but to begin with, Paul challenges the Corinthians to hold on to the message of the Gospel as it was first preached to them (15:1). He was the only person who could speak to the Corinthians in this way, because he was the man who first preached in Corinth. After a brief comment which suggests he believed that some had already abandoned true faith (15:2), he places his cards on the table, saying, *'for I handed on to you as a primary importance what I also received'* (15:3), and outlines Christian belief in the resurrection and also the evidence of that belief (15:4,5).

From the earliest days of the Christian church, people have spotted that the words Paul uses to describe the Christian faith in verses 4 to 7 are an early 'creed', probably used throughout the church at the time. Such a form of words appears to have been used at baptisms, when a convert was required to give public testimony, conforming to the basic truths of the Gospel. Such an idea is intriguing in itself, and we can find evidence of this not only here in 1 Corinthians, but also elsewhere in the New Testament, such as in Peter's first letter. Certainly, the language used here is different from the rest of Paul's writing. The statement of faith is best understood when set out as follows is:

- Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures
- He was buried, and was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures
- He appeared to Cephas and then to the twelve
- He appeared to more than five hundred believers at one time  
(most of whom are still living, though some have died)
- He appeared to James, then to all the apostles

You can see from this presentation that Christ's death is placed first, *'Christ died for our sins'* (15:3), and this is followed by His resurrection, *'He was buried and was raised on the third day ...'* (15:4). Now there are a number of places within the new Testament where Paul has written similarly about core Christian beliefs (e.g. Rom. 3:21-26, Eph. 2:13,14 etc.), but this one is different. Remarkably, Paul describes the resurrection of Christ as *'according to the Scriptures'*. Now it is possible that Paul used this phrase simply to say that Jesus' resurrection was prophesied in the Old Testament, but although he argues this elsewhere, he does not use this phrase. Now we know that towards the end of the first century A.D., people were beginning to gather the great works that would eventually become the New Testament, that is, some of the Gospels and a few of Paul's letters. Is it possible that Paul reflects this new gathering of Scripture here in 1 Corinthians? We do not know, but it is an intriguing thought.

These arguments sound authoritative to those people who already have faith, but to those who do not, some proof is required of these extraordinary claims. The early church appears to have decided to offer a threefold proof, that Jesus *'appeared to Cephas and then to the twelve'* (15:5), and that he also appeared to a large gathering of people (15:6), and lastly to one of the elders of the Christian church, James, together with the other Apostles (15:7). It seems likely that Paul is here referring to the first Pentecost (Acts 2), and there is

nowhere else in Scripture where that great event is alluded to outside the book of Acts. The reference to James is also interesting, because it is likely that this means not the disciple James, but James the brother of Jesus, who became a leader of the early church in Jerusalem (Gal 1:9f.).

Lastly, Paul adds his own testimony to this general statement of faith, he says that Jesus Christ appeared to him as well as the others (15:8). The words of this sentence are clearly Paul's own writing in comparison to what has gone before. He does not wish to add to a great creed of the early church, but he does want the Corinthians to know that his message is authentic, and that he believes in the resurrection not merely because other people say so, but because he has seen the risen Lord himself.

Of course, this is only the beginning of 1 Corinthians 15, the longest chapter in Paul's letter to the Corinthians. There is much more to come, but Paul starts the chapter as he does any of his great arguments, by citing the traditional and basic beliefs of the Christian church of his day. He knew, as we now know from looking back through history, that the lifeblood of the church is in the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the preaching of this core message is essential to the health of the church.

## Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of the passage
- Paul's message to the church, and to us
- Paul's concern about the Corinthians (15:1-3)
- The 'Creed' (15:3-7)
- The apostle Paul and the grace of God (15:8-11)

### **Notes on the translation of the passage**

#### **V1 'I now remind you of the Gospel'**

The Greek in this sentence says 'I now declare to you ...', but as the sentence clearly says that he is repeating what he said previously, it is best to translate as 'remind'

#### **V6 'though some have died'**

The expression reads 'though some have fallen asleep'. This however, is the way Jesus spoke about death during his lifetime (as in the story of Lazarus – John 11:12,13), so we are justified in translating 'some have died' here.

#### **V10 'His grace toward me has not been without purpose'**

Many Bible versions have '... has not been in vain'. This is rather general and vague, when the Greek word here ('kene') refers to something that has no function or purpose. Paul goes on to speak about the work God has given him to do.

#### **V10 'though not I, but the grace of God within me'**

Many Bible version make this sentence more clumsy; 'though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me' (NRSV). In this case, the omission of the verb in Greek is similar to the way we omit the verbs in English; there are no words for 'it was' and 'that is' in the text, and the phrase works very well in English, as it is!

#### **V11 'this is what we preach, and this is what you believe'**

Strictly, the Greek is a simple formula; 'thus we preach, thus you believe'. However, because 'thus' (or as some Bible versions translate 'so') is not a common way of speaking in English, I have given the nearest equivalent. This conveys the exact nature of the comment clearly.

Each part of this scripture needs our careful attention. The text of the first few verses is strange and must be used with care. The 'creed' itself is a remarkable part of the New Testament, as we have already begun to appreciate, and Paul's comments about himself are typically enigmatic. As we study these three aspects to this passage, we will find further significant items of interest.

### **Paul's message to the church, and to us**

When Paul says 'Fellow believers, I now remind you of the Gospel I preached to you, which you received, and in which you now stand, and through which you are saved.' (15:1,2) he could be addressing any Christian congregation, Although Paul knew full well to whom he was speaking when he wrote this, it is also possible that he knew his letters would be used and read by more people than those for whom they were written. Within Paul's work there is a complete confidence in the unique and unchangeable nature of the Gospel, and he has been proved to be right, because it is remarkable that with the vast changes that have

happened in the world over two thousand years, the church remains focussed on the same Gospel. All attempts to change it and reinterpret its basic meaning according to what is said here in his letter have failed, and a Gospel that preaches the saving power of Christ's death and resurrection remains the heartbeat of God's people, the church.

However, just as today, people in the very earliest days of the church attempted to add to or change this basic message. The reason why Paul's writings are a part of Scripture and many other early writings are not, is because he would not shift his stance on the essential meaning of the Gospel. As a consequence, Paul's insistence on the unchanging nature of the Gospel, here in this passage, warns us that he is about to tackle those who think they can change it! The Corinthians had some odd beliefs about the resurrection, and how this affected their salvation and their relationship with God, and he was determined to call them back to faith.

### ***Paul's concern about the Corinthians (15:1-3)***

The grammar of verses 1 and 2 have been a matter of debate for years, but I am convinced, along with most commentators that there should be a full stop after 'through which you are saved'. This means that according to the logic of what Paul says, the Gospel that produces true salvation is something that is 'preached' (or equally, 'declared'), then 'received', and then 'sustained' (as in the expression 'in which you now stand' - 15:1). This interesting sequence reminds us of the importance of holding on to the truths of the Gospel as first taught to us. No one receives everything of salvation at first, and a firm foundation can only be built on the common faith of all God's people everywhere. This is what Paul felt had been compromised at Corinth, and it was his intent to explain this.

The second part of verse 2 has been unhelpfully translated over the years (see notes above), but I have drawn out of the text two clear concerns of Paul about the Corinthians. Firstly, as has already been hinted, the phrase 'if you held on to whatever words I preached to you ...' shows his concern about their ability to sustain and hold on to the basic Gospel message as first taught. Secondly, the phrase 'if you did not believe thoughtlessly' shows Paul's concern that the Corinthians did not exercise their God given intelligence in building on the truth they were taught. This last point does not come out strongly in most translations of the Bible, but it is an essential part of what Paul says here. It is also a warning to us to use our minds and dedicate them to the Lord, as he says elsewhere in his writing (see Romans 12:1-3).

Paul had handed on to the Corinthians the basics of the Gospel (15:3), but he did not believe that they had kept to them or thought about them, and this was the root of their problems. The other issues he had dealt with at Corinth were important and deeply affected the whole life of the church (such as strife and divisions, lawsuits, eating at the 'Lord's Supper' and the practice of the spiritual gifts). However, a lack of understanding the basic Gospel risked people's very salvation and relationship with God.

### ***The 'Creed' (15:3-7)***

It was always the purpose of 'creeds' to set out a standard belief for all Christians. The Apostle's Creed remains the most commonly known Creed, and it dates from before the fourth century. In those days, a Creed was something to be memorised rather than written down, as evidence of the Christian faith of the one who could say it. The basic structure of the creed here in 1 Corinthians is fascinating because it does not just give a list of 'this is what I believe about God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit (as does the Apostles Creed). It simply states what the Gospel is, and then gives two forms of verification for belief in this Gospel. Firstly, it is verified by scripture, and secondly, it is testified to by a significant group of people.

In the summary of the creed in 1 Corinthians, I have highlighted the 'Gospel' part of the text, the verification in scripture is in normal type, and the verification by renowned people is given in italics.

- **Christ died for our sins** according to the Scriptures
- **He was buried, and was raised on the third day** according to the Scriptures
- *He appeared to Cephas and then to the twelve*
- *He appeared to more than five hundred believers at one time*  
(most of whom are still living, though some have died)
- *He appeared to James, then to all the apostles*

It is clear from the structure of this that the Gospel consists of the saving work of Jesus, as explained by His death and resurrection. This is the only place in the New Testament where the words 'Christ died for our sins' appear. This may seem strange, except there are other places where the writers of the letters, in talking about the death of Jesus, say that it was done 'for our sins' (Gal 1:4, 1 John 2:2, 4:10), or they connect His death with our sins in some other more extensive statement about faith (e.g. Romans 6:5f.). As we read this passage in verses 3 and 4, however, it is easy to see that the first two statements are remarkably similar to the central section of the Apostles' Creed, with the addition of Ephesians 4:9 concerning the descent to the dead:

- He was crucified, died, and was buried;
- He descended to the dead.
- On the third day he rose again;

The inclusion of the witnesses was probably very important in the first one hundred years of the church, because people knew and remembered individuals who had connections with Jesus and the original story. Verse 6 comments that 'some have died', and this was an increasing problem for the early church, for when the witnesses all passed away, a simple creed such as this was no longer adequate. Other statements of verification were needed, and we can see that the creed needed to grow.

The appearances mentioned are relatively straightforward to explain, though we have no real way of knowing exactly what was meant by an appearance. Clearly, Jesus 'appeared to the disciples after the resurrection' (as in Matthew 28, Luke 24 and John 21), and some of the Gospels indicate that Peter ('Cephas') saw the risen Lord first (John 20:3, Luke 24:12). We have no evidence in the Gospels or the other letters in the New Testament of large numbers seeing the risen Lord, such as 'five hundred at one time' (15:6), so the only indication of large numbers is after Pentecost, where Acts says that three thousand were 'added to their number' (Acts 2:41), then another five thousand (Acts 4:4). The most interesting comment here is about an appearance to James (15:7), and we assume that this must have been James, the Lord's brother (see above, and Gal 1:19). Only Paul mentions James, the leader of the Jerusalem church as being the Lord's brother, and this indicates that he was converted as a consequence of a special appearance of the Lord. We often imagine that Peter was the leader of the church in Jerusalem, but the evidence from Acts says that after a few years it was James (Acts 12:12:17, 15:13f. and 21:18), but it could not have been James the disciple who was killed by Herod Antipas (Acts 12:2).

All the appearances of Jesus were treasured and valued in the days of the early church, because they provided evidence for people of the bodily resurrection of Jesus, and as we will find out shortly, the bodily resurrection of Jesus was an important part of Paul's understanding of the resurrection (15:12f.)

### ***The apostle Paul and the grace of God (15:8-11)***

The last section of this text is about Paul's own experience of being added to the list of those who had 'seen' the risen Lord. Many letters of Paul contain some partial description of Paul's experiences (see 2 Corinthians 12, Galatians 1:18f., Ephesians 3:1f.), and it is difficult to add up what he says to gain a consistent explanation of events. However, Paul always insisted that he was entitled to be called an apostle because he joined the list of those who had seen the Lord.

Here in this passage, however, Paul adds a comment about this that is somewhat remarkable, describing himself as 'one of untimely birth'. This is the polite way to translate this text, however, because the Greek reads more accurately as 'one who was born as an abortion!' Clearly, Paul did not intend us to take this literally, most probably intending to make the rather crude comment that he had his experience of the risen Lord out of sequence with the rest; his was a 'birth at the wrong time', and this is the way that most Bible versions now translate this.

One aspect of the last part of this passage is not immediately obvious, but arises quickly as soon as we think about what is being said, and what Paul is attempting to say here in this passage. In almost every recorded instance of the Lord's appearances to disciples after His resurrection, He commissioned the disciples He met to some task. We all recall the instance of the Great Commission, given in Galilee to the disciples as they gathered there to meet Jesus at His command (Matt 28:16f.), but this also applies to Peter on the occasion of meeting Jesus by the lakeside (John 21:165f.). Paul, of course, included himself in this list, for he believed that he had been given a special commission to 'go to the Gentiles' because of His meeting with the Lord (Acts 9:15, Galatians 2:10). The connection of appearances with commission was essential because the early Christians were required to do an incredible job of establishing God's church on earth. The records in Acts, for example, show the extraordinary nature of what happened and the importance of guidance by God's hand. The work of mission was conducted because of the Lord's specific instructions and commission (see, e.g. Acts 11:19f. and 13:1f. etc.)

We are not in a position to quibble with the comment by Paul that he worked harder in mission than the other apostles; there are no clear records to suggest otherwise! However, Paul freely acknowledged that what he did was a result of the grace of God (15:10). This is a reminder to us that God's favour and grace is not some mere blessing, as if it was an inactive or abstract thing. God's grace is like the touch of His blessing on what we do for Him. Some might ask why they do not experience God's blessing or grace, but sometimes this may be because His grace is given for specific Gospel work commissioned. If we are not working for the Lord or doing something active for His purposes, then we may not necessarily know His 'grace'!

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# Discipleship

## Application

At the end of this passage, Paul says, 'this is what we preach, this is what you believe'. He was of course referring to the Gospel, as testified to by the simple creed given in this passage. For Paul it was one thing and it was undisputable and unchangeable. It was preached, and the responsibility of people was to receive it and believe it, and then build upon this in the fellowship of the church. In my own experience, many church organisations attempt to define a 'statement of faith'; and indeed, I have done this for the website on which you are reading this (it is to be found on the 'vision' page). In writing such statements of faith, it is my opinion that we need to be very careful to keep what we say as simple as possible, and as close as we can get to the Gospel basics found in the Bible. This passage, of course, gives us a good start. Although it does not speak about God the Creator or the work of the Holy Spirit, and a comment on these is a key feature of the Apostles Creed and most other Christian 'statements of faith', it does declare the Gospel of salvation succinctly. There is no need, in my opinion to try and make any definition of the Gospel more complex, providing we keep the connection with the authority of scripture, and the testimony of God's people. Though in our case, such a testimony is not of those who have an experience of the risen Lord, but those who have passed on the true faith throughout history, whoever they may be.

This chapter of 1 Corinthians has a long way to go, but the start is important, and reminds us of the need to keep ourselves focussed on the heart of the Christian message; that Jesus has died to save us from our sins, so we may have a free and unfettered relationship with God. Surely this is the basis of all Christian faith.

## Questions for groups

1. Discuss in your group what you mean by 'salvation', and whether the church is united in what it means by this.
2. What would you feel is necessary to add to the creed in this passage in order to make it a true reflection of your faith?
3. In what ways are you commissioned to work for the Lord, and what 'grace' do you experience to enable you to do this?

## Discipleship challenges

- *In what ways do you 'hold on' to your faith? Reflect on how you can do things that enable you to maintain and sustain your faith, rather than just presume that it will continue.*
- *Pray for all those who find it hard to be sure about the heart of their faith, especially when life is hard and tough, and when they doubt God because things get too bad. Pray that they will know the special blessing of the Lord's presence as they do what He wants of them, and begin to trust Him in all circumstances.*

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## Final Prayer

We love You, Lord Jesus, for Your grace has proved gloriously sufficient for all our spiritual needs. You have stayed with us on difficult paths; ministered to our broken hearts; received our worship when we lifted You in praise; and guided us through troubled times. We praise You, Lord Jesus. AMEN

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