

## Prayer

Thank You, Lord Jesus Christ, for giving us the gift of this day. May we accept this gift and use it to its full, not merely by continuing to do what we have done before, but by building on the foundations of the past to make a secure future for ourselves and others. As we go about our daily work, inspire us by all You have taught us about Your Kingdom, and may we appreciate how different this is from the world in which we live. Thank You for the gift of this day: AMEN

## Prayer Suggestions

*(Offering alternatives that can broaden your experience of prayer)*

### Prayer ideas

*Consider the scriptural injunction to be content in all circumstances (Phil 4:11). Ask the Lord to help you find this peace throughout your day*

### On-going prayers

- **Pray for understanding between people of different backgrounds.** *Pray for greater understanding between Arab people and those of the 'Western' world, especially over cultural issues such as the place of women in society, religion and education. Pray that Christ will open up doorways into Arab culture*
- *Pray today for those who are still suffering from the e-coli food poisoning outbreak in Europe. Pray that the source of the outbreak is found soon.*
- *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.*

## Meditation

Jesus, Your great love  
encompasses more than we can understand:

Your power to create  
far exceeds the evil and destruction in our world:

Your work in this world  
is far more extensive than we can appreciate:

Your mercy towards all  
will never cease, and Your love for us is infinite.

Your vision for the future  
is far more exciting than most can comprehend:

Your eye for justice  
penetrates every feature of life, in every culture:

Jesus, Your great love  
Is magnificent, glorious, unmerited, eternal, and free!

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## Bible passage - 1 Corinthians 1:4-9

<sup>4</sup> I always give thanks to God for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, <sup>5</sup> for you have been enriched in Him in every way, in all speech and all knowledge <sup>6</sup> (in so far as the evidence of Christ has been verified among you) <sup>7</sup> so that you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly await the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>8</sup> He will also sustain you to the end, blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>9</sup> God, through whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.

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# Bible Study

## Review

Today's passage is a prayer of blessing and thanksgiving for the people of the church in Corinth. Paul writes similarly in most of his letters (see Phil 1:9f. Col. 1:3f.), and he gives us the impression that he was deeply attached to the churches, especially those he had founded. The tone of his writing appears initially to be positive and encouraging. Paul gives thanks for the 'grace of God' and for spiritual gifts found within the church (1:5,7), and he commends their sensitivity to the Lord's return (1:7) and their perseverance (1:8).

As we look further, however, we will notice that Paul does not appear entirely happy with the Corinthian church. Having given thanks that they were '*enriched in Him in every way*' (1:5) he adds this rather strange phrase: '*in so far as the evidence of Christ has been verified among you*' (1:6). It sounds as if Paul had been looking for proof that the church was behaving properly! What were they doing that made him suspicious?

As we read on, we will indeed discover that Paul was very sceptical about the activities of some within the Corinthian church. The reason for his writing was not simply to congratulate the church, to deliver a wonderful treatise about the 'Gifts of the Spirit' (1 Cor 12) or to give a great speech about love (1 Cor 13), it was to address a long list of problems within the life of the church. The bulk of Paul's letter deals with divisions (1:10-3:23), dissention and strife (4:1-6:20), problems over the understanding of marriage (7:1-40), food sacrificed to idols (8:1-12), the proper practice of the 'Lord's Supper' (10:14-11:33) and more. These were serious issues for the discipleship of the church reflecting its doctrinal integrity. As we will see in the coming studies, Paul was about to enter stormy waters!

Nevertheless, our passage today presents a clear and godly perspective from which all such problems may be tackled. There is a strong sense of doctrinal unity and purity here within Paul's writing, as is often the case when he is addressing problems. Paul gives thanks to God for the church not because of its works, deeds or spiritual prowess, but because God Himself is great. By grace, He has touched people's lives '*in Christ Jesus*' (1:4) to create His new people, the '*church*', who are one '*fellowship of His son*' (1:9). This is the glorious truth of the Gospel, and in his letters, Paul never ceases to give thanks for these things, whatever the problems of the individual church.

It is also worth noting that although Paul knew there would be problems ahead, he was still willing to applaud the church for its positive points. He commends the Corinthians for their dependency on Christ, being '*enriched in Him in every way*' (1:5), and not '*lacking spiritual gifts*' (1:7). He was also keen to commend the church for having a proper attitude towards the return of the Lord Jesus. Paul says that they '*eagerly await the revelation of our Lord Jesus*' (1:7), and in this, they reflect Jesus' own teaching that God's people should always be ready for His return and the Last Judgement.

Lastly, there is one very important comment from Paul here towards the end of our passage, in verse 8. In the midst of any difficulties faced by God's church, Christ alone sustains His people through the trials of life and He alone is able to present them '*blameless on the day of our Lord*' (1:8). Whatever the problems, those who trust in the Lord will receive their reward of eternal life.

So it remains true for us today that when we have to deal with problems and difficulties within the church, and our faith is tested to the core, we should not lose hope. Our hope, like that of all God's people of the past, is in Christ alone and we may have confidence that He will be faithful to us. If our ultimate destiny depends on our own resources, we will fail. But if we rely on the saving resources of Christ, we will be upheld even in the midst of the most difficult trials.

### Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at:

- Thanksgiving
- Enriching the church
- The return of the Lord

## Notes on the text and translation

### **V4** '*I always give thanks to God for you*'

In some translations you will find; 'I always give thanks to my God ...' The difference reflects the very earliest manuscripts of the New Testament from the fourth century AD. The two earliest manuscripts

contain corrections by the scribes who wrote them, indicating that the word 'my' was probably a later addition. It is only a small point, but it does alter the emphasis of the text.

#### **V6 (in so far as the evidence of Christ ...)**

This verse is a secondary clause, and we know this because of the way it is introduced by the Greek word 'kathos' meaning 'inasmuch as' or 'in so far as'. For this reason, it translates best if we place it in brackets; this enables us to read the sentence through from verse 5 to 7 with verse 6 as an additional thought.

In addition, you will find that many translations of verse 6 say something like this; 'because our testimony about Christ was confirmed to you'. Unfortunately, such translations take the most 'religious' route to translating Paul's words here, and if you read translations such as the NIV or the NRSV it is hard to comprehend what Paul is saying. The translation above does not divert from the Greek text, and grammatically, it is more correct than most. The Greek for 'testimony' also means 'evidence', and the verb 'confirmed' means 'to find out the truth'. The translation makes sense only if you read it as a word of caution from Paul.

#### **V7 'so that you do not lack any spiritual gift ...'**

Here, Paul introduces the word 'charismata' meaning 'spiritual gift', which will gain great significance during his letter. The meaning of the word is not clear at this point, and some translators prefer 'gift of grace' or just 'gift', but it is likely that in using this word, Paul was picking up on some special use of the word used already by the church to denote special spiritual gifting (see study).

### Going Deeper

In going deeper, we will first study the thanksgiving found in verses 4 and 9, with special emphasis on the grace of God found in Christ Jesus (1:4). We will then look at what Paul said about God's enriching of the church in verses 5 to 7, and the possible reasons why this triggered his aside, found in verse 6. Lastly, we will look at what Paul said about waiting for the return of Jesus and the 'day of the Lord Jesus Christ' (1:7,8). The whole section is thanksgiving, but Paul does in fact chose his words carefully!

#### **Thanksgiving**

If you read the other letters of Paul, you will find that all of the 'thanksgivings' beginning these letters (e.g. Romans 1:8f., Philippians 1:3f., Colossians 1:3f.) have common characteristics. Each uses the Greek word 'eucharisteo' meaning 'thanks', but not just thanks in abstract; we tend to use the word rather randomly today and in a way that lacks real meaning. The Greek word has its roots in the idea of doing something to show gratitude, it is not simply an attitude, and true 'thanks' is expressed in deeds and demonstrable commitment.

We all know what it is like for people to say 'thanks' to us and use the word simply as an excuse to get on with their own agenda, virtually ignoring what has been done for them. When someone acts like that to us we feel that they have walked over us and taken our generosity for granted. Paul's understanding of thanks to God was no mere assumption or the taking of God for granted. Thanks was to be offered to God in an attitude of prayer, and Paul's action in writing was itself an expression of thanks. Paul would not have written if he did not believe that by so doing, he honoured God and honoured the church, and if by so doing he had to speak strongly about some issues, then he did this with the belief that God would bring good out of what he did. Despite all the problems he encountered in the church, Paul was fundamentally an optimistic person, for whom thanks was a natural way of approaching God, and what he did and said was a form of thanksgiving to God.

In this passage, Paul's active and practical thanks is a result not primarily of the deeds of the church, but the prior 'grace' of God in Christ Jesus (1:4); the deeds of the church are secondary. A Christian is one who does everything in the light of God's prior mercy and grace through Jesus, and even dealing with church problems can therefore be the subject of thanks! This thanks is therefore a constant feature of Paul's life; if you read the differing expressions of thanks in Paul's letters mentioned above (Romans, Philippians, Colossians) you will find that each of them speak about 'always' giving thanks. The cynic may say that this is just a mode of speech, but the spiritual person realises that thanksgiving is something which wells up within and affects everything that a person does. God's people are to be a people of thanksgiving because they are people of God's grace, and they are called into fellowship (1:9) with the One who is the source of that thanks. What more could we want!

These words of Paul expressing thanks surround today's passage in verse 4 and 9, and we must read what Paul has to say about the church in Corinth from his point of view, which is firstly that of thanks to God.

#### **Enriching the church**

The result of the grace of God working in the life of His people is that they are 'enriched ... in every way, in all speech and all knowledge' (1:5). Speech and knowledge were regarded by Paul as very important for the church, and it is fascinating that he mentions them as the first fruit of grace. In the life of the church today, many people will readily confess that they do not feel able to speak in public about anything, let alone their faith, and many will also confess that they do not understand their faith as they might. Many, indeed, suggest that they do not understand the Bible with any great depth, and often fail to read it. This may not be true in your culture, but beware, Satan always tempts God's people to draw away from God's Word.

It is essential that the people of God are literate and knowledgeable about their faith, and ready to express it in words. Without this, the essential task of doing the evangelistic work of the Gospel cannot be done, indeed, many people who attend church regard 'evangelism' or talking to other people about their faith as the responsibility of others! However, the Spirit has led Paul to tell us in no uncertain terms that the grace of God will enrich us in speech and knowledge! So much of scripture tells us that declaring the Good News of God in word and deed is our primary task as God's people. The Lord needs us to be people who are knowledgeable about our faith and willing to speak it.

At this point in his letter, Paul added his extra thought, in 'brackets', and this is verse 6. It is as if Paul questioned whether God's people in Corinth were really experiencing the grace of God and appropriating it in speech and knowledge as God required. We will find out that the Corinthian church had become side-tracked by all kinds of issues, and they compromised the church's ability to proclaim the Good News and grow as God intended. We will find out that one of the problems in the church was that people experienced a variety of spiritual gifts, but it was claimed that some were more important than others. So God had given the church a great abundance of gifts, but the church had become dysfunctional because the gifts were being handled in a worldly manner and not a godly manner. This is the reason for the tension we find in the letter in verses 6 and 7, but if we follow Paul's words in this passage, then he points, right here, to the solution of all such problems. If Christ is at the heart of the church, and in the heart of His people, then His grace will set things in order and establish true godly priorities, namely, knowledge of faith and the ability and confidence to communicate it. All else must be seen in this light. We are not Christians for the sake of our own religious sensibilities and interests; we are liberated slaves to sin, set free to serve our God.

### ***The return of the Lord***

Within Paul's thanks, he has indicated the kingdom priority of the Gospel, and the importance of disciples who know their Lord declaring the Good News and understanding their faith. He has also dared to suggest that there are problems which need to be put in order. It may not sound like 'thanks' to you, but Paul spoke with that supreme confidence in God that is found in true thanksgiving.

Paul concluded his thanksgiving with a comment about the life of the church in Corinth which needed no qualification; they eagerly awaited 'the revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ.' Right at the end of 1 Corinthians, Paul spends one long chapter discussing a number of issues concerning the return of Christ and also the resurrection of the dead and the spiritual reality of God's Kingdom (chapter 15). However, this chapter does not appear to have been written as if to correct any false teaching in Corinth, merely to re-affirm the true teaching of the church and the centrality of the resurrection (see 1 Cor 15:1f.). Its inclusion here is not an indication of some 'issue' or 'problem' to be dealt with later, it is the natural consequence of the work of God's grace in the heart of the believer beyond that of being enriched in speech and knowledge (1:5) and receiving spiritual gifts (1:7). Many people struggle with the idea of Christ's return, but many who do are the same as those who find it hard for whatever reason to engage with God's Word and read it regularly. You cannot read the Bible with any regularity without facing the frequent and detailed references within it to God's authority both to create and also to bring his world to its proper end; and we cannot read the story of Jesus' life and escape the issue of Jesus' stated expectation of returning to this earth in glory.

It is our hope and our end to be united with our Lord in the glory of His Kingdom, and the same grace which works within us enabling us to be God's agents of the Gospel in this life also prepares us for the next, sustaining us for all that's to come (1:8). This is Paul's thanks, and his heartfelt greeting. Some analysts suggest that it was right for someone writing a letter in Paul's day to include within the thanksgiving some hint of the significant issues to be addressed in the letter. Personally, I am not sure whether this is genuinely true, or whether it is the result of people observing the connection between the content of Paul's 'thanks' and the content of his subsequent letters.

## Application

This prayer of thanksgiving by Paul is straightforward to read, but contains a great deal. If we take away the matter of its hint about deeper problems, then we are left with a quite fascinating sequence of thoughts. Paul's thanks are an expression of the grace of Christ at work in the life of the church, enriching God's people in speech and knowledge and in spiritual gifts, and enabling them to come to terms with all it means

to look forward to the coming of Christ in glory. This, in itself, is a significant message. Imagine what it would be like if the church was empowered so that all its members were confident to speak the name of Jesus and testify to the truth of their faith! Imagine a church in which all felt able to engage with the substantial issues of faith raised by Biblical text, not because everyone had become a biblical scholar, but because everyone had become a reader of God's Word and was a keen follower of everything within it! Why is it that we seem to accept that such a vision is unrealistic? Why have we accepted that people who attend church and are 'good' Christians have no general privilege of sharing the Gospel and being evangelists? Why have we accepted the concept of a disempowered church, devoid in significant areas of the grace of Christ?

If you ask such questions, you may not like the answers you find. However, Paul prayed his prayer in a spirit of thanks to God. He has His hands on all that is happening in the church and the world, and He will bring it all to its conclusion and resolve all our problems and difficulties. Without this starting point to all our endeavours, we will find it hard to get anywhere or resolve our problems. Ahead of Paul lay the task of writing a substantial and difficult letter, but he rose to the task magnificently; and ahead of us may lie great problems, but in Christ, and in thanks to God for His grace, all things are possible.

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## Discipleship

### **Questions** (for use in groups)

1. *When you offer prayers of thanksgiving, what do you do or say? How does this differ from what Paul writes in this passage, and why?*
2. *What does this passage tell you about the grace of God in Christ?*
3. *How important is the Christian's 'speech and knowledge', and how does this reflect the grace of God in Christ?*

### **Personal comments by author**

*When I began to write about this passage, I did not think I would be find myself expounding God's grace. Yet that is what the passage leads us to do! There is so much fear in the life of the church about all manner of things today, is it possible for God's people to break out of their shells and share the blessings of God's grace? The task of evangelism has never been so important, as the world's population spirals out of control in countries where religion is scorned. We need to take our eyes off our problems and fix them on Christ and the work of His Spirit. He alone can lead us proclaim truth to the whole world, however impossible this seems!*

### **Ideas for exploring discipleship**

- **Something to do:** *Speak to a friend in church about what you have read today, and see whether they feel confident about understanding their faith and explaining it or speaking it. Pray with one another about this.*
  - **Something to pray about:** *Pray for all God's people, the church. Pray that all who name the name of Jesus may be prepared to read God's Word and get to know their Saviour better.*
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## Final Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, save us from becoming so wrapped up with our own lives and our own work that we do not give You time or to listen to Your voice. Bless us we pray with a spirit of discernment, so that we may hear Your Word to us whenever it comes, and head it warnings and rejoice in its encouragement. Thank You, Lord Jesus, AMEN

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