

## Prayers

### Opening prayer

Almighty Lord and God, receive my prayers today;  
Forgive my wayward nature, and listen to my heartfelt concerns;  
Fill me with Your power and love, and tell me what I need to hear;  
Make me complete in You, so I may praise You all my life;  
Almighty Lord and God, receive my prayers today; AMEN

### Prayer Suggestions

General theme for the week: vision

**1. For yourself**

*Pray today in quietness, waiting on God for what He will show you about yourself and your spiritual journey*

**2. For your friends and family**

*Lift each of your friends and family to the Lord and seek His blessing on their lives*

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

*Lift the church fellowship of which you are apart to the Lord in prayer, waiting for what the Lord will say to you about your relationship with the church.*

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

*Pray for the time to come when Jesus will come in glory to bring this world of evil to a close, and when God will justly judge the world and all who are in it*

### Meditation

Sin persists, as a fearsome and persistent enemy;  
It suggests, tempts, and draws us into its deception.

We wander slowly from the truth we know, little by little,  
And find too quickly we have strayed away from God.

We come across some task that faith requires of us,  
And the devil whispers, 'Surely not!' So we don't do it.

We hold on to awful habits, not thinking they are bad,  
And fail to let the Lord deliver us from our daily sins.

We accept the vices of our culture; casual sex, dishonesty ...  
And turn away from what the Bible says about morality.

We reserve the right to speak as we wish, to say what we think,  
And forget the wisdom of precise and thoughtful speech.

Save us, Father, and give us courage to face the enemy,  
To reject his temptations, and turn ourselves again, to You.

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## Bible Study

### Bible passage – 1 Corinthians 16:13-24

<sup>13</sup> Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, be brave, be strong. <sup>14</sup> Let everything you do be done in love.

<sup>15</sup> Fellow believers, you know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia and they have given themselves to minister to the saints; I appeal to you <sup>16</sup> therefore to submit to such people and all those who co-operate with them and work hard. <sup>17</sup> I am glad about the arrival of Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus, since they supplied what you were lacking <sup>18</sup> and gave relief to my spirit and yours. Give recognition to such people.

<sup>19</sup> The churches of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Prisca send warm greetings in the Lord to you together with the church that meets in their house. <sup>20</sup> All the fellow believers send you greetings. Greet one another with a holy kiss.

<sup>21</sup> I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand. <sup>22</sup> If anyone has no love for the Lord, let him be cursed! O Lord, come!

<sup>23</sup> The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you. <sup>24</sup> My love be with all of you in Christ Jesus. AMEN.

## Review

These are the final words of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, and there is much we can learn from them! For example, verses 13 and 14 probably had a particular meaning to the people at Corinth, but they have continued to give strong encouragement in faith to all who have read them since. Also, the description of Stephanas' ministry appears simple (16:15f.), but it hides a mature understanding of Christian ministry and speaks even to us today. Other comments about the house church (16:19) and the 'holy kiss' (16:20) have given rise to considerable debate in our own times about church structure and how we greet each other in Christ. Lastly, Paul's final words of greeting remind us of the grace of the Lord Jesus (16:23), without which the Church of God would not exist, and the fellowship of love (16:24) which lies at the heart of all true faith (see also chapter 13). This may be just a collection of thoughts at the end of a long, complex letter, but it gives us considerable food for thought and spiritual encouragement until the very last word!

There is no doubt however, that Paul had mixed feelings as he finished. He had written strongly to the Corinthians and challenged both what they believed and why, and he had also spoken disparagingly about the way that the church was organised and run (e.g. 1:10f. and 11:17f.). Yet throughout, we can sense Paul's desire to help the church because he loved this community he founded at the farthest reaches of his second missionary journey (Acts 18:1f.) It is likely that Paul was concerned about whether good leadership would emerge at Corinth so that things could improve there. He does not discuss leadership issues elsewhere in this letter, but here in its ending he speaks warmly of Stephanas, and encourages the people at Corinth to submit to his authority and take note of his selfless and hard working service (16:16). It is more than a hint about proper leadership.

It is typical of Paul that his letters mention significant people either at the church to which he wrote (see his reference to Stephanas and others, (16:15-18), or from the wider church. Here, he sends greetings from Aquila and Prisca, two Jewish Christians from Rome who had been thrown out of their home city with other Jews by Claudius, around 50AD. They found their way to Corinth, where they were involved with the original evangelism (Acts 18:1-3) and during the writing of this letter, they were helping Paul in his missionary work at Ephesus by using their home as a church (see 16:8 and 19)! It is also worth noting that these two faithful servants of the Lord were back in Rome by the time Paul wrote to the church there (Romans 16:1), in the years just before he was sent to Rome to answer before the Emperor. These well travelled Christians were certainly well used by the Lord after experiencing the trauma of the Emperor's persecution.

It was not unheard of for a man such as Paul to dictate a letter to a copyist, and it seems from the last few verses that this was the case here as it was elsewhere (see specific references to this in Galatians 6:11, Colossians 4:18, 2 Thessalonians 3:17). Written in his own hand, what he wrote next was important, and it is characteristically blunt and pertinent. Whatever problems there were between himself and the Corinthians, Paul spoke to the heart of all controversy in the church when he said 'if anyone has no love for the Lord, let him be cursed! O Lord, come!' Christ and Christ alone judges all things, and Paul was supremely confident that his own love for the Lord and for the church at Corinth would be vindicated, if not in this life, then in the next. Finally, he wished both grace and love on his readers (16:23,24) in a fascinating last two verses. Paul was known for his characteristic greeting 'grace and peace', but if any word characterised his teaching in 1 Corinthians, it was 'love', so here in this letter, his greeting was 'grace ... and love.'

## Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of the passage
- Encouragement (16:13,14)
- Greetings from Asia (16:19,20)

- Greetings from Paul (16:21-24)

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

#### **V15 'the first converts'**

The Greek word here is 'aparche' which is normally translated 'first-fruits' in the presentation of sacrifices. Paul uses this as an appropriate term for the first converts in a region.

#### **V16 'all those who co-operate with them and work hard'**

It is not clear in the Greek what this means. When translated literally, the last phrase is something like this; 'all those who co-operate with and work hard', without a direct grammatical connection with the household of Stephanas mentioned earlier. However, the idea of 'co-operation with' is meaningless here unless we add this connection, as I have here with the words 'with them'. Also, the word for 'work hard' is quite strong; it means 'work to the point of weariness'.

#### **V17 'since they supplied what you were lacking'**

This phrase is translated very differently in other Bible versions. The Greek words are of loose meaning, and it is all a matter of how they connect with the next verse. I have taken the view that Paul was speaking about deficiencies in the Corinthian leadership that were made up by the arrival of these experienced Christians, and he was glad to commend them.

#### **V19 'greetings'**

The word used here in Greek is 'aspadzomai' which is a general and sometimes formal word for greeting, used typically in most of Paul's letters for greetings sent at the end of letters. The warmth of the greeting is set by the accompanying text.

#### **V19 'Prisca'**

The name is familiar in this form in most of the letters of Paul, but in Acts, Luke says 'Priscilla', which is a familiar and diminutive form of the name. The ancient manuscripts are divided as to whether Paul says one or other here, but on balance, Prisca is preferred because this is the name found in most of Paul's letters.

#### **V22 'if anyone has no love for the Lord'**

The word for love here is not 'agape', but 'phileo'. This means have deep feelings for. It has a powerful meaning but it is not the same as 'agape'.

#### **V22 'O Lord, come'**

This fascinating phrase is not Greek, but Aramaic, transliterated into Greek. However, we cannot be sure what it means. This is because the letters are MARANATHA (in those days, all letters were what we call 'capitals'). However, this could be MARAN ATHA, which is a statement 'our Lord has come!' or it could be MARANA THA meaning the summons 'Our Lord, come!'

#### **V24 'AMEN'**

The ancient manuscripts are almost equally divided about whether there is an 'amen' at the end of the letter. Romans, Galatians, Philippians, 1 and 2 Timothy have an 'AMEN' close to or at the end, but other letters do not. It is very hard to work out what might be right; but I have chosen to accept it.

As we look further at this passage, one or two complex parts of this text emerge as requiring our attention. It is not at all certain what Paul was saying, for example, in verses 17 and 18 about Stephanas and his friends. Moreover, it is not clear what exactly lies behind his comments about the churches in Asia (16:19,20), for example. The closer we look, the more we will find!

### **Encouragement (16:13,14)**

Throughout the Bible, God's people are encouraged to be bold and remain strong. Joshua found courage (Joshua 1:6,7f.) from the Lord as he faced entry into the Promised Land; David was given courage from God when he was told that his family would both rule and save all Israel (2 Samuel 7:27), and Ezekiel prophesied to Israel, telling them to remain strong whilst the Lord dealt with them at the time of the Exile (Ezekiel 22:14), for example. Now that the early Christians were facing 'many opponents' (16:9) in their essential work to build up the Kingdom of God on earth amongst people, it is not surprising that Paul issued a 'call to battle', which is what verse 13 might sound like in any other place within the Bible! However, this call to action was not a call to fight but a call to act with purposeful love; 'let everything you do be done in love' (16:14). It does

not take much observation on our part to notice that the Corinthian Christians were not at peace; they had warring factions (chaps. 1-4) and they took each other to court to sort out disputes (chap. 6).

Paul's working principle throughout the letter to the Corinthians was that there was a deep connection between the love of God, the work of the Spirit and the practical and spiritual life of a true believer. This lay behind the magnificent and famous chapter 13, and it was not an appeal to sentiment or to 'soft option' Christianity. Hidden in verse 13 behind the word translated 'be brave' is a Greek word that can also be translated 'act like a man'. The Greek word is made up from another Greek word meaning 'man', but over the years, came to mean a variety of 'manly' qualities including bravery and courage. I ask you to take note of this however, because what Paul said could indeed read something like this 'act like a man but do it in love'. Of course, Paul's general point is best made without reference to men specifically, and all Christians need to learn the maturity of bold, courageous and yet loving action. Out of such paradoxes we discover the richness of what it means to please God; Paul knew this and he desperately wanted the Corinthians to walk this path.

### ***Leadership, and what was 'lacking' (16:15-18)***

When Paul wrote to the Corinthians, it was in the mid 50's AD and in the midst of his second missionary journey while based at Ephesus (see above). But with only twenty years having passed since Jesus' death, and only a handful of years since the first churches were established, there was no clear understanding of leadership. Later letters of Paul indicate that he was increasingly concerned about good leadership (see 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus), but how did people like Paul and others gain an idea of how the earliest churches should be led? All the evidence from 1 Corinthians and other early letters such as 1 Thessalonians and perhaps Galatians, suggests the first churches had no leadership as we understand it today, and they lived by a sense of shared equality and fellowship. This, indeed, was what had gone wrong at Corinth, as the whole letter indicates, and there were no 'leaders' to control doctrine (chaps 1-4), see to disputes (chap 6-8), ensure proper practice at 'the Lord's Table' (chap 11), or structure the worship of the church so that tongues was not used inappropriately (chap. 14). So it is possible that out of this chaos, Paul was indeed reflecting on the need for good and proper leadership.

What happens next in our passage is of great importance, because as we plainly see, Paul commended Stephanas as someone who had given himself and his entire household for 'ministry to the saints' (16:15). This man had given everything not to hold rank or dominate others, or have the privilege of preaching, but simply to serve the needs of the church. How he did this we do not know, but he was someone who was known for 'hard work' (16:16), which translates as 'working to the point of weariness'. This, said Paul, was the kind of person to whom the church should submit (16:16), and this notion, despite much deviation throughout the years, has remained the highest principle of Christian ministry and service. It is found first in the life and work of Jesus himself, as a 'servant' (e.g. see John 13:1f.), and was established as a principle for Christian leadership in the early churches by Paul (see 1 Tim 3:1f. 6:11f. Titus 1:10f. etc.). To this day, God's people respond well to being served by leaders who are fully involved in the life of faith with their families, who evidently work hard, and who work in co-operation with others and for the service of all.

Stephanas is described as among the first converts in that part of the world (both Corinth and Athens were in Achaia, which was southern Greece). This has created something of a problem, because the record of Acts says that Paul went to Athens (in the same region) before he went to Corinth, and although his ministry there was short and controversial, he did have some converts there (Acts 17:34). In addition, Paul says in the first chapter of 1 Corinthians, that he had baptised Stephanas (1:16); so was Paul exaggerating when he said Stephanas was 'one of the first', or forgetting what happened in Athens? You will find that different books suggest a wide range of explanations of Stephanas' background and conversion, but we do not really know for sure. Paul certainly regarded him as one of the founding members of the church at Corinth, and one whose example warranted his authority as a leader (16:16).

In addition, verse 17 is rather complicated, because many have suggested that it implies Stephanas had arrived at Ephesus bringing a gift to Paul from Corinth, and possibly the list of questions asked by the church to which Paul had replied in this letter. It is suggested that this explains Paul's favourable comment that Stephanas and his friends had brought relief to Paul's 'spirit' (16:18). This is possible. However, it is equally possible to suggest that this passage says something else. It could be that Paul was delighted at the news that Stephanas had arrived with friends in Corinth and was in a position to provide the leadership that was lacking (see 16:17), thus bringing relief both to Paul and to those at Corinth (16:18) who knew a leader was needed! We cannot know which is correct, but personally, I prefer the second option as it makes sense of the whole paragraph.

### ***Greetings from Asia (16:19,20)***

Aquila and Prisca were two great stalwarts of the church (see above), and because they had been at Corinth at the beginning of the work there (Acts 18:1-3), it is not surprising that Paul sent their 'warm greetings' to Corinth (16:19). The Greek construction Paul used to say 'the church that meets in their house' is a little

strange, and this has given rise to endless disputes. People ask whether the 'house church' was the standard format used by Paul in his evangelistic work, or whether it was purely a temporary phenomenon before the church became large enough and rich enough to afford its own buildings. We cannot sort this out from the evidence of the Greek grammar here, and it is wrong to try to do this. The 'house church' was clearly important for the initial phases of evangelism in the early church, but we cannot say more, and would be unwise to make a policy out of a brief comment like this in one New Testament letter. All we can say for sure is that Prisca and Aquila must have been wealthy people to have been able to provide a villa large enough for a church gathering in Ephesus, having been thrown out of Rome by Claudius and spent some time in Corinth! They are perhaps an example of Christians who were rich and used all their resources for the Lord's service (see my comments on giving in yesterday's passage!

The greetings sent by Paul included a call to 'greet one another with a holy kiss' (16:20). Times change, and styles of greeting change, but we cannot avoid the observation that Christian fellowship is intended by the Lord to be something of close sisterly and brotherly affection. Certainly, the embrace was physical, but certainly not sexual, and although history has many examples of greeting in the form of a 'kiss', we just do not know exactly what form of contact was involved, though there certainly was contact! Within one hundred years of the founding of the church, one of its great writers, Justin Martyr, tells us that the command to greet with a kiss had been transformed into a liturgical action performed formally at the start of the communion service. But whatever forms of greeting we employ in the fellowship of the church today, we need to ensure today that it reflects warmth and affection. If it does not, it is not just this command from Paul that we circumvent, but all that the Bible says about loving our brothers and sisters in the fellowship of the Kingdom.

### ***Greetings from Paul (16:21-24)***

Finally, the last few lines of the letter are packed with meaning, mostly along the lines of affirming 'love' as the guiding principle of the life of the church. It sounds very strong for Paul to say 'if anyone has no love for the Lord, let him be cursed!', but we must remember that Paul was speaking not to people in general, but to people who had been baptised into the church. Moreover, he spoke to people who had, according to the reports he had received, acted without the qualities of love and compassion that Paul would have expected of those who were baptised.

Paul was aware through his Old Testament background that Moses had called the people of Israel to face a choice when they entered the Promised Land, and this was formally presented in the 'blessings' and 'curses' of Deuteronomy 27 and 28. It was clearly put to the people that those who had received the benefits of God's love and care had a choice to accept these and act with faithfulness and obedience, or to reject them and go their own way. One was a path of blessing, and the other a path of curses; and in the same way, verse 22 represents a warning and a curse against those who choose their own way instead of the Lord's, and verses 23 and 24 represent a blessing on those who hear his words as from the Lord.

The grace of God (16:23), of course, is the only basis for the faith we have, and although Paul has not spent time in this letter explaining the nature of this grace, the little he said was sufficient to say a great deal. By blessing his readers with 'grace and love' (16:23,24), Paul left them with his final message. The church could not exist without the mercy and grace of God, and in the light of this supremely loving revelation of God's character, there was no other possible human response, except love. Paul believed that he had spoken strongly but in a spirit of love, seeking only the good of all; and he looked for a response from the Corinthians that showed the same quality of love.

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## **Discipleship**

### **Application**

There are many places in scripture where we gain good advice by a simple text or a brief quote. Verses 13 and 14 are worth putting alongside some of the best of these (e.g. Micah 6:8, Amos 5:24 or Romans 12:1). These two verses give good advice to the Christian to be watchful, because the enemy will always attempt to make the life of faith difficult or troublesome, and in such instances, we must 'stand firm in faith' as the foremost objective. The faith we have received is not to be trifled with or quickly cast aside, it is worth defending at all costs, and if we are brave, and if we face the enemy in the strength of God, then we can overcome the problems with which we are presented.

When Paul wrote this letter, he was probably hard pressed by the demands of the evangelistic ministry ahead of him at Ephesus; however, he had to face the task of replying to the Corinthians and all their problems. He must have felt as if Satan himself had taken hold of the church that he had founded there, and the reports he heard were grievous. Nevertheless, by replying carefully and methodically, Paul faced all the

issues he was presented with and has left us with an invaluable tool for understanding how to deal with problems in the church.

The mention of Stephanas at the very end of his letter is an essential reminder to us that ministry is service, and it is not something that we can consider lightly, and perhaps not something for which we can put ourselves forward. Many churches today have systems through which those who feel called to enter into ministry jump through various training 'hoops' in order to find themselves accredited and perhaps ordained into ministry. The church has largely abandoned the idea that people need to be appointed to ministry, not put themselves forward for it. I often find myself reflecting that the systems most churches use for finding leaders is little different from the world's ways of finding managing directors, or leaders of institutions. How can we recover that essentially spiritual process whereby the real leaders of God's people are recognised through the quality of their service (as in our text today), and are enabled to use the ministry God has given them for the good of all? Too many leaders in the church today are not servants, except of themselves and their own ideas, and though my judgement here may seem harsh, I know no other way of trying to identify why so many of God's people have been led astray and far from the Gospel. Too many churches are profoundly ineffective in the service of the Gospel, and leadership is no small part of the problem. Like Corinth, these churches, whether local or national, need to hear some spiritual truths if they are to change for the better.

### Questions for groups

1. Discuss what words within this passage are most encouraging to you and to your church community, and why?
2. What can we learn about leadership from Paul's comments about Stephanas, and how do they apply to us today?
3. Is it possible for us to use the idea of curse as well as blessing today, and if so, what does it mean?

### Discipleship challenges

- *Read over verses 13 and 14, or perhaps verses 23 and 24, and let them dwell on your mind. Let the Lord speak to you in His own way through these words, either to bless you or challenge you in some way.*
- *Pray for those true workers of God who serve the church unstintingly and with loyalty that goes beyond mere duty. Pray that they will be recognised as the true leaders of God's people, especially if they do the most menial and unfashionable of tasks.*

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## Final Prayer

Within the pressures of everyday life, help me, heavenly Father, to rise triumphant in my faith over every adversity and give You the glory for every defeat of the enemy that I achieve or witness. May I be so victorious over the evil one that I have no fear of him! AMEN

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