

Prayers

Opening prayer

Be close to us today, Lord God, especially when we face the unexpected darkness of life. You are good and You have created the world in light not darkness, yet we find that sin and evil still oppress us and make our lives hard. Lift our hearts to take hold of Your greatest gift of salvation so that we may rise above all darkness and live in the power of the Holy Spirit. We ask this in the name of Jesus: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

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

Do you feel that you are owed forgiveness by someone; do you know in your heart that there are people you should forgive? Pray about these feelings and check out Jesus' teaching about forgiveness and personal responsibility (Matt 18:21-35).

On-going prayers

- **Pray for your neighbourhood.** *Pray for the people who live around you who you do not know, even if you do not know their names. Pray especially for those who live close by but remain isolated from the community because of age or cultural issues*
- *Give thanks to God for the gift of sight, and pray for the blind*
- *Pray for those who are in prison, pray that they will be served well and enabled to change their lives for the better*

Meditation

When life seems hard and you struggle to find hope,
Look to the rock that is Christ, and lean on Him.

When life's challenges await, and strength is required,
Look to the Spirit that is Christ, and accept Him.

When trouble is defeated and you begin to see the light,
Look to the truth that is Christ, and receive Him.

When all is at peace and you are satisfied and content,
Look to the light that is Christ, and believe Him.

When the battles of life must be fought with courage,
Look to the banner that is Christ, and stay by Him.

When victory over the enemy lies within your grasp,
Look to the hope that is Christ, and trust Him.

Bible Study

Bible passage – 1 Corinthians 2:6-13

⁶ Indeed, we speak wisdom to those who are mature, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age who are passing away. ⁷ Rather, we speak the wisdom of God as in a mystery, something kept hidden and which God predetermined before time began for our glory. ⁸ None of the rulers of this age recognised this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. ⁹ It is written,

'No eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived what God has prepared for those who love him,'

¹⁰ and this is what God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the deep things of God.

¹¹ Who, then, really knows someone except the human spirit within? In the same way, no one knows about God except the Spirit of God. ¹² Now, it is not the spirit of this world that we have received, but the Spirit that has come from God, so that we may understand what God has graciously given us. ¹³ We therefore speak of these things not in words taught by human wisdom, but in the teaching of the Spirit who interprets spiritual things to those who are spiritual.

Review

Throughout the early part of 1 Corinthians, Paul has been speaking about the message of salvation. He has also described this message as '*wisdom from God*' (1:30), and as something far in advance of human wisdom (1:25-28). It is reasonable therefore to ask about what this wisdom is. Here in this passage, Paul writes as if to answer such a question, and explains how God's wisdom is made known.

Now in the first century A.D. there were a large number of pagan beliefs, many of which suggested that God was 'unknown', and was to be found by obtaining secret knowledge or wisdom. This was a tempting form of religion to people of those days, and there is evidence that in the first century, some thought that Christianity was a religion like this. All one had to do was to receive the secrets of God through the teaching of Jesus Christ and be baptised! Of course, this was not the Gospel, and Paul worked hard to explain why.

Perhaps rather tongue in cheek, Paul begins this passage by using a number of words that were commonly used in these mystery religions; the Greek words for '*wisdom*' and '*maturity*', and also the phrase '*rulers of this age*'. Of course, Paul would have nothing to do with mystery religions; but he used these words and phrases forthrightly with the single purpose of explaining the Gospel, as the next verse makes clear (2:7). He was determined to tell the Corinthians that true faith was not a matter of religious systems but a matter of truth; and that all knowledge and wisdom about God had been hidden before Jesus Christ came into the world. It had been revealed partially to the Jewish people in times past, but now Christ had come it was fully revealed through the work of God's Spirit (2:11-13).

Paul does not talk about Jesus Christ here in this passage, he has already explained that He is at the heart of the Gospel and the wisdom of God (2:1-5). Rather, this passage is a fascinating argument about how the truth about God is revealed. To begin with, Paul refers back to Isaiah (2:9). The prophecies of Isaiah all stem from what God said to him at his call, when it was revealed to him that the truth about salvation would never be understood by the Jewish people (Isaiah 6:9, 64:4). However, God gradually revealed the truth about salvation to Isaiah in the course of his ministry. It was Isaiah who received the great prophecy about the coming of the Messiah (7:14), His peaceful kingship and authority (9:2, 11:1f.), and His suffering as a Servant (53). By quoting Isaiah, Paul wanted the Corinthians to know that the truth about God was not merely something new that had to be discovered, it was an ancient truth that was being revealed.

The next part of Paul's argument is fascinating. In verse 11, he explains how the truth about God is revealed. After making the obvious point that each individual can only know himself or herself in his or her own spirit, Paul goes on to say that God is therefore only known by His own Spirit (2:11). The Gospel of God, and all the truth about God's wisdom, power and authority, is therefore known because of the activity of God's Spirit in the world. Now God has graciously given us His Spirit as a gift (2:12), and in this way it is possible for Christians to know the full truth about salvation, about God's love and everything done for them by Jesus Christ (1:30, 2:2).

We have to look to the book of the Ephesians for a fuller explanation of how the Spirit was given to people after the death of Jesus Christ; Paul writes there, '*when he ascended on high ... He gave gifts ...*' (Ephesians 4:8). Of course, this only explains what was obvious on the day of Pentecost, when after the Ascension of Christ, the Holy Spirit came on the first disciples in power, and gave them strength and boldness to do the work of the Gospel as commissioned by Jesus (Matthew 28:19).

At the heart of our passage is Paul's conviction that all knowledge about God is available to us as a gift through the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. The challenge to all of us is therefore to be open to receive what God will give us. If we are, then we will find that there is always more that God will do for us and He is always ready to lead us further into the deeper truths of His mind and His will.

Going Deeper

- Notes about the translation of the passage
- Paul's passionate writing
- The focus on the work of the Spirit
- Paul's reasons for writing about mysteries and wisdom
- Wisdom and maturity in paganism and in Christian faith

Notes about the translation of the passage:

V6 'we speak wisdom to those who are mature ...'

In this sentence there are two significant words; 'sophia' which is translated wisdom, and 'teleios' which is translated 'mature'. These Greek words are both closely associated with the first century religion called 'gnosticism' (see above). This was based on the idea that access to God came through a series of 'mysteries' ('sophia') through which the believer has to pass sequentially, in order to find fulfilment, or ultimate belief in God ('teleios'). So these words had their normal meaning of 'wisdom' and 'maturity', but for some, they were a religious code word. It is possible that Paul used these words purposefully; he knew that some used them for pagan religious beliefs but he wanted to claim them back again for Christian faith. As they stand, wisdom and maturity are important for God's people.

V9 'But what was written ...'

This is a quote from Isaiah 64:4, but it is hard to work out exactly what Paul means here because of the way that the verse divisions have been created. If it were not for these conventions, a translator would probably suggest something more like this, which makes more sense here in this paragraph.

'Through the Spirit, God has revealed to us the meaning of what was written; 'No has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.' For the Spirit searches everything, even the deep things of God.' (1 Cor 2:9,10)

V11 'for who really knows someone except the spirit within'

This translation is rather different from what you will find in most Bibles. However, the Greek reads literally like this:

'For what man knows about the things of man except for the spirit of the man which is in him?'

Whilst it is possible to work out what this means, it does not read well, and every translator grapples with trying to find some way of putting this in plain English.

V12 'so that we might understand what has been graciously given to us by God.'

There is a problem here, which is that the phrase 'it what has been graciously given' comes from one Greek word, 'charisthenta'. In some ancient Bible versions, this has been confused with the famous word 'charismata', meaning 'gifts'. For this reason, some Bible versions translate the verse in this way:

'so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God.'

Of course, Paul might well have the famous 'Gifts of the Spirit' in mind, but of course, we do not know. It makes more sense in this passage for us to assume that he was referring only generally to the graciousness of God. The preacher can then connect this passage with the 'Gifts of the Spirit', but that does not discount the possibility of connecting this passage with other gifts such as salvation and redemption.

Paul's passionate writing

Having dismissed the philosophical basis of the arguments and divisions within the Corinthians church (1:18-2:5), Paul began to write with that overflowing zeal and energy we recognise from his other letters; an energy that seems to have been lacking in the letter so far. With passion, he writes about how the Spirit 'searches everything, even the deep things of God', and is then received by those who have responded to God in Christ Jesus (2:12), teaching them the true spiritual mysteries of the world and of God. Paul did not write this as some thesis about the Spirit. This is what He had discovered personally at Corinth; for Paul, the Spirit could be a Corinthian solution to a Corinthian problem!

Clearly, this passage marks a transition in the letter, and I suggest that Paul introduced the Spirit to explain why the Gospel was radically different in nature to the other religions found in the Roman Empire of his day.

The focus on the work of the Spirit

Yesterday, by looking back at when Paul founded the church at Corinth (Acts 18), we discovered that he had to change his preaching to focus on Christ because of his failure to convert many people in Athens (Acts

17:22-34 - see Cor 2:1-5). He was then more responsive to the Spirit, taking the decision to stop preaching in synagogues (Acts 18:5-6), and fulfilling some personal vows to enable him to move on in his mission (Acts 18:18f.). Following this, he emphasised the importance of the Holy Spirit to the Gospel (Acts 19:1f.), and was demonstrably guided by the Spirit in returning through Macedonia to Jerusalem (Acts 19:21). There is no doubt that Paul had received the Holy Spirit early in his Christian life (see Acts 9:17, 13:9), but strangely, there is no mention of the Spirit in Paul's missionary work from Acts 14 to 17. His time at Corinth seems to have been one of renewal not just in his preaching but also in the things of the Spirit!

It is therefore quite possible that as Paul wrote his letter he was aware of his own experience in Corinth and the need to refocus on the Spirit, so he wrestled the discussion about problems there away from his protagonists by speaking about God's revelation through the Spirit. God had saved Paul himself through spiritual renewal in Corinth, so now Paul argued that the Spirit revealed the true wisdom of God. The Spirit also communicated truth from the heart of God to the heart of Christian believers (2:10).

Paul mocks the language of the philosophers and debaters of his day by using their terminology of 'wisdom' and 'maturity' (or 'completeness'). These words were commonly used in the Areopagus in Athens (see Acts 17:22) and wherever learned people debated to discuss the religious paths whereby a 'spiritual' man could journey through the 'mysteries' of life to reach the goal of 'completeness' or 'maturity'. 'What a sham!' Paul seems to say, speaking of the true wisdom of God kept secret since the foundation of the world (2:7). Not even the most learned rulers recognised this, for they had killed the Son of the one true God despite all their supposed 'wisdom', 'secrets', and 'maturity' (2:8)!

Paul's reasons for writing about mysteries and wisdom

If we read the first few verses of this passage in English, we wonder what all the fuss is about, for Paul appears to be speaking simply about wisdom and maturity. What Paul did however was to take these words and use them to glorify God rather than let them be associated with the mystery religions that spawned the language. Paul regarded anyone as 'mature' who has received the 'wisdom of God' (2:7) by faith. His description of this Gospel as 'predetermined before time began for our glory' should tell us straight away that he was talking about God's eternal plan of salvation, achieved through Christ, crucified (see 2:1-5). In a caustic aside, Paul castigated the 'rulers of the age' (or possibly, 'authorities of the age', a phrase referring to the intellectuals of the world rather than its Emperors and war-lords), for failing to understand the maturity of the Gospel of Christ crucified. In annoyance, Paul quoted Isaiah 64:4 (2:9):

'from ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides You, who works for those who wait for him.'

Admittedly, the journey from Hebrew to Aramaic to Greek means that this quote in 1 Corinthians is a little different from the Hebrew original, but Paul correctly understood that Isaiah was expressing great frustration. Specifically, Isaiah was irritated when those who had been redeemed by the Servant (see Isaiah 53) remained blind to the Spirit because they had not accepted the spiritual nature of the Servant's work (see my notes on these passages in Isaiah). This was exactly what Paul wished to say about the church at Corinth. Christians there were not acting as if they were the redeemed of Christ and full of the Spirit. This quote from Isaiah therefore gave Paul his route to advise the Corinthians about the true solution to their problems of division; the Spirit of God.

Wisdom and maturity in paganism and in Christian faith

The details of so-called 'mystery religions' were the result of centuries of Greek philosophy and reasoning. In previous years, great philosophers such as Plato and Socrates had graced Greek culture and transformed it, but their legacy had deteriorated over the years, and the Roman Empire had become a melting pot of different beliefs, philosophies and customs. Perhaps Paul hoped that the spiritual vacuum of Roman society would be filled one day with Christian faith (it happened in the fourth century AD), but if he did, he did not say this. He merely continued to preach the Gospel with conviction, for no other reason than that the Lord Jesus had saved him and the Holy Spirit directed his life.

The goal of Paul's writing here in this passage was to explain the wisdom of God and Christian maturity. We will discover later that the Corinthian church believed that it was very mature in the things of the Spirit, and boasted a wide experience of spiritual gifts and graces. The arguments used by the Corinthians to claim maturity and defend their divisions were worldly, but Paul felt that as long as the church was divided, then the '*rulers of this age*' had invaded the territory of the Spirit.

Discipleship

Application

- How we get to know the things of God.
- The importance of the work of the Spirit in the life of the church
- Keeping the religions of our day at bay

How we get to know the things of God.

I never cease to be amazed that so many Christians feel insecure about their knowledge of the Gospel, as if they need to be constantly fed a diet of good sermons if they are to be proper Christians. What rubbish! Of course, listening to good sermons is a vital part of the growth of God's people, but this passage reminds us that the source of our knowledge of God is the Holy Spirit who works within us. If we have not yielded to the Holy Spirit then we will not get to know the things of God!

The Spirit teaches us what we need to know about living as Christians today; not in a super spiritual or abstract way, but through the ordinary fellowship of God's people gathered to worship Him. If, God's people wander from the guidance of the Spirit, then like the Corinthians, they will turn to earthly wisdom and certainly, like the Corinthians, succumb to divisions.

The importance of the work of the Spirit in the life of the church

Of course, the Holy Spirit will always bring people together; He will not divide. Some may dispute this saying that people who claim the gifts of the Spirit divide the church. Now that may well be the case, but we should not allow this to divert our gaze from the truth about God's Spirit rather than the truth about human frailty and our ability to be fractious. God is one, He is not divided.

Keeping the religions of our day at bay

In this passage, Paul fought to keep at bay the influence of the religions of his day. However, it is significant that he used the language of 'Gnosticism' to argue for the Gospel. He was always willing to try and claim back language that was being used to promote other belief systems.

In our own day, much of the language of English is based on Scripture, and the way we use words and make quotes is deeply embedded in England's Christian past. The fact that this has now permeated the world through the influence of the English language at large is often forgotten. Phrases such as 'love your neighbour', 'turn the other cheek', and 'the love of money is the root of all evil' and countless other allusions and forms of speech underpin democracy, let alone the Christian church. Surely, it is worth copying Paul and trying to counter the influence of secular and other religions.

Questions for groups

1. What does this passage teach us about the work of the Holy Spirit?
2. How does the average Christian gain access to the wisdom of God? How can God's people help each other know more about God and His salvation?
3. How can God's people ensure that they remain spiritually mature and sensitive?

Discipleship challenges

- *Reflect on what you can do to ensure that you make decisions that are spiritually based as well as practical and wise from an earthly point of view. Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal more of God's will to you and be willing to receive what the Lord God would give you.*
- *Pray for those who struggle with what is happening in their church because they feel that decisions are taken in an ungodly and unspiritual way. There are many reasons why people are unhappy at church and the only way to get around this is to be sensitive to the work of the Holy Spirit.*

Final Prayer

Make us fruitful in Your Kingdom, Lord God of power and of might. May we contribute to the universal work of Your Gospel in everything we do, and may the news of Your love be brought to all people so that they might respond. May we be fit servant of Yours in this work, and may we be consistent in our service. Bless us we pray: AMEN
