

1 Corinthians 1:2-9

I'm not sure what you think about when we talk about church. Paul has a lot to say about it in this epistle. In fact, in his opening comments, he paves the way for what will come like a bolt from the blue to the believers in Corinth. Paul doesn't go softly-softly when he talks about the church of Christ, it's very close to his heart and it's even nearer to the heart of God. The fact is, it was purchased through the blood of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul's remarks are very insightful for a couple of reasons – one, you can see where he's coming from in his attitude to the local assembly of God's people, and number two, it's clear that Paul has his eye on the big picture. He's a great believer in the local church but, sitting alongside that, he knows full well that it's an integral part of the international family of God. The church in your town and mine is part and parcel of something big and beautiful that God is doing in today's world.

Paul also indicates that we share something in common – yes, we are part of God's forever family, no doubts about that, but we are also those who 'call on the name' of the Lord – that's what happened to every one of us when we came as sinners to Jesus, that's what we do when we seek God's face in prayer! You see, when we're down on bended knee, we're all on the same level. You're no better than I am, and I'm no better than you! We're not all the same, but we're all one in Christ Jesus – and, again, that is one of Paul's hobby horses in this particular book, something he'll develop in a few chapters.

The phrase that Paul adopts in verse 2 in relation to the church is a fascinating one – he calls it 'the church of God'. That says something, it sends out all the right signals. It's a fantastically powerful reminder to them and to us that it's not their church, it's not our church, it's not Paul's church – the church is God's church! It belongs to him. In that sense, it is exclusive. It was God's bright idea in the first place and it cost him a lot to bring it into being.

The fact that the church is growing year-on-year pays eloquent tribute to the amazing grace of God; it's his global initiative in seeking men and women from every culture and continent that causes it to flourish in so many different parts of the world – in some places more than others, it has to be said.

And when the job is done, and the time is right, the triumphant church will be ushered in to heaven. What a moment! Magic! We'll enjoy the Lord's presence throughout the countless aeons of eternity. Yes, the future for the church is bright, the future is Christ. It's also worth noting that the church is not bricks and mortar, it's not stained glass windows and padded oak pews; from his perspective, it's people, real people, people like you and me! In fact, you can have a church without having a building – the church is a company of believers who have been called by Jesus Christ. We are the church! In that sense it is made up of individuals who have a dynamic and personal relationship with the living God.

I think we'll pause for a short music break, that'll give you time to mull over some of the truths Paul has been sharing with us on the church.

MUSIC BREAK

Paul makes the point in verse 2 that such folks 'are sanctified in Christ Jesus'. That means we're a very special group of people – we've been set apart by God to be a unique people in today's world. Sanctification isn't something that comes and goes, it isn't dependent on our actions. Sanctification is a position in Christ – it's how God sees us!

Your life and mine should be lived only for Jesus, not looking after me, myself, and I; that means we're different and we're distinctive in the twenty-first century. There's something about us that catches the eye of other people. We'll stand out in a crowd for we're living our lives 24/7 on the sharp edge for Jesus Christ. Sanctified – we're set apart by God, set apart for God, and set apart unto God!

The challenge is extended in the next phrase where Paul says we are 'called to be holy'. In a sense, this follows on naturally from what

Paul has just been saying. The fact that we are sanctified means that God is shaping our lives into the image of Jesus – the purpose of that is that we might lead a holy life in a postmodern world.

This is something we are ‘called’ to – just as the Lord called us to follow him at the moment of our salvation, so he calls us to follow him day after day. Jesus is holy, God is holy, the Spirit is holy, therefore, it is incumbent upon each of us to be in the same mould. He wants us to be Jesus look-a-likes! Holiness is you and I having a clear mind and a clean heart – holiness is the essence of authentic Christian testimony. It’s what God wants from each of us – he’s satisfied with nothing less!

Think about that for a few moments and, with God’s help, rise to the challenge!

MUSIC BREAK

The next verse gives us Paul’s standard greeting to churches all over the place: he offers them ‘grace and peace’ and it comes to them courtesy of ‘God [the] Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.’ I love the way Paul does this so often for I think it’s a tangible reminder that God’s supplies never run dry – there’s no danger of him running low on grace and peace.

He dispenses it freely and he longs for us to experience it and enjoy it to the full. By the way, when God ladles out both blessings, he never skimps in any shape or form; he never short changes his people – for you and me to be on the receiving end of his blessing is for us to be on the end of a lavish portion of his incredible goodness. It seems to me it’s a double barreled blessing and it’s the kind of thing we need to get on with life in real world. We need his grace to cope with the demands and pressures of life, and we need his peace to keep our hearts and minds on an even keel. It can be tough living for God in a pagan environment but, when we have his grace and peace, we have all that we need to keep on going. They help us keep our head above water. We’re not much use to anyone when we’re sinking – these blessings keep us afloat and on top of things!

The plain fact is, there's never a day goes by when we can't do without them!

Paul's compliments in verse 4 are most striking when he says: 'I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus.' That's a good way to win people over – praise them, but when you do it, be genuine, be authentic. Don't soft soap them, don't butter them up, don't patronise them – be real when you're handing out bouquets, be generous when you're dishing up the compliments!

In spite of all the hassle they have caused Paul, he still finds a reason to thank God for them – and it's not so much because of them, it's because of the grace of God in their hearts. They're a vital part of God's family and, so far as Paul is concerned, that means they're his brothers and sisters.

There's a relational side to this faith experience and it's one we should never downplay or downgrade. They mightn't see eye to eye, but Paul still has enough love in his heart for them that he rejoices in their experience of God's grace. That tells me he doesn't have the blinkers on – he values them for who they are in Christ.

In your church and mine, that's a good policy to take on board when we're dealing with other people. There's no point in us alienating the very people we're trying to help! They have big enough problems without us adding to them! If we lose them at the outset, the chances of us winning back their confidence is fairly slim. It's in dicey stressful situations like this where you can tell that Paul's been round a few corners in his time! At the end of the day, it's all about man management and getting the best out of people.

We'll pause for a music break and, when we come back, we'll take a look at the upside of grace in their hearts.

MUSIC BREAK

Paul opens up the floodgates when he writes in verse 5 that 'in [Jesus Christ] you have been enriched in every way - in all your speaking and in all your knowledge ...' When we take that verse at face value, it means that no man loses out or misses out when they

come to faith in Jesus Christ. The Lord adds a brand new dimension to all our lives – he gives us a reason for living and he gives us something worth living for.

Our lives are seriously enriched in him. Mind you, compared to what life was like before we came to Jesus, we were really so impoverished, we were beggars at the back door of God's grace – in one sense, we hadn't two pennies to rub together. The love of God has made a mega difference to us; it's a sea change, and it's all down to God's amazing grace.

You see, it's not only what goes into our heads, it's what comes out of our lips – it's knowledge and speaking! We know it and we tell it! And grace helps us to do both. Like everything in life, the proof of the pudding is in the eating, hence Paul's huge word of affirmation in verse 6 where he writes: 'our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you.'

In other words, they had the real McCoy when it came to faith and knowing Jesus as Lord. They knew it, Paul knew it, and everyone else in the community knew it as well! You see, if we know the Lord, it's obvious to those around us!

God's grace touches upon every area of our lives – it impacts our home life, it influences our mindset in the business world, it gives us a new ethic for daily living. It gives us an edge over our competitors and our peers. It gives us a different attitude to life and death, to time and eternity. You see, it seeps into every fibre of our being, it permeates every part of our lives and, in no time at all, we become a people of grace, a people saturated with God. That's grace!

Paul concludes in verse 7 that, because of all that God has done in their hearts so far, '[they] do not lack any spiritual gift as [they] eagerly wait for [the] Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed.' I like that for again it shows how magnanimous Paul is when it comes to handling sometimes difficult people. He sees a touch of God's goodness even in the worst of people – he's quick off the mark to accentuate the positive. The time for hitting them below the belt is a wee bit later on – this isn't the best moment to go at them all guns blazing.

Hence, his upbeat words about their ongoing commitment to the things of God and their zeal and enthusiasm for the second coming of Jesus.

Even though they blew it big time in so many areas, there's a few things where they're still ok and this is one of them – for them the prospect of seeing Jesus is quite exciting. There may be a touch of naïveté on their part as they may see it as a quick exit out of the troubles of life, a speedy escape route from the ups and downs of life – be that as it may, it's a good hope to have in a turbulent world. That's what keeps us sane, that's what enable us to keep on going and maintain the momentum for God.

We'll take a break and when we come back I'll give you a quickie summary of their strengths as a local church.

MUSIC BREAK

So far in chapter one we've discovered a lot of wonderful qualities about the first century congregation in Corinth. Oh yes they were in a bit of a shambles but it's not all bad – Paul says they were genuinely saved in verse 4, they were generously endowed in verse 5, they were securely established in verse 6, they were spiritually gifted in verse 7a, and they were prophetically alert in verse 7b. It's fairly obvious that Paul is warming to his theme when he tells them in verse 8: '[God] will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.' That says something, doesn't it! Paul knew what they were like but he doesn't send them on a guilt trip. He gently reminds us of the ability of God to get us through every upheaval in life; if anyone can do it, God can!

He wants to bolster them, he wants to build them up, he wants to give them a confident word that should shore them up – they may feel weak at the knees, but God is strong, he's omnipotent, he's all-powerful. Nothing is too hard for him. He can handle every situation.

The Lord won't only keep them strong today but when the hard times come tomorrow, he'll still be there for them. In fact, Paul

wants them to keep their eyes on the finishing line by assuring them that God will get them there. Too many fall out on the last lap, there's no need for them to drop out, they can keep on going, because the Lord will infuse his strength into their frail frames of weakness. True for them, no less true for you and me! That's a promise we can sink our teeth into!

Paul doesn't want them to red faced with embarrassment at the end of the journey. He longs for them and us to stand before the Lord with no tinges of regret – he wants us to be blameless or unimpeachable before him at the judgment seat of Christ. When we're there at the bema to give an account of our lives, he doesn't want us to hang our heads in shame and wish we'd given the Lord more – it seems to me that Paul wants us to go out with a bang rather than with a whimper!

Think about that for a minute as we take a short music break; when we come back we'll see God's role in our lives. He's not sleeping in the back seat – he's active, he's on the ball!

MUSIC BREAK

If these guys had any doubts about the character of God, Paul is at pains to point out in verse 9 that God is faithful. There's no messing around with Paul when it comes to the character of his God – in every changing scene of life, God is true to his people, true to his word, and true to himself. God doesn't say one thing one minute and go out and do something different five minutes later – he can't contradict himself. He's God! And he's solid, reliable, dependable; look folks, you can always count on God. He's faithful to the end! He was faithful when he brought them out from the cold into the warmth of his love, he was faithful when he brought them out of darkness into his marvellous light, he was faithful when he called them into fellowship with Jesus and, when God does that, he doesn't change his mind after a while. He's committed to us for ever! That's faithfulness!

In the final analysis, none of us have anything to brag about, we are what we are and we are where we are by God's boundless grace! It

has nothing to do with me, nothing to do with you, it has everything to do with him. We're flawed, we've failed, at one time or another we've been a big letdown, but God doesn't ditch us – he keeps on loving us.

That's what Charles Wesley was focusing on when he penned the wonderfully uplifting words: 'And can it be that I should gain, An interest in the Saviour's blood? Died he for me, who caused his pain? For me, who him to death pursued? Amazing love, how can it be, That thou, my God, should's't die for me? No condemnation now I dread, Jesus, and all in him, is mine, Alive in him, my living head, And clothed in righteousness divine, Bold I approach the eternal throne, And claim the crown through Christ my own!'