

Verse for the Year, 2009

Our Verse for the Year for 2009 is a 'buy one and get one free' pair, two verses for the price of one!

*The God of all grace,
who called you to his eternal glory in Christ,
after you have suffered a little while,
will himself restore you
and make you strong, firm and steadfast.
To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.*
[1 Peter 5.10-11]

Here we have some marvellous words of Scripture to encourage and inspire us all as we enter a new year.

Our chosen verses speak of

➤ **God's wonderful nature**, as *The God of all grace*. In looking at this verse, we have reminded ourselves that God's grace undergirds every aspect of our relationship with God. Our *salvation* is all of God's grace (Eph 2.1-9). So too is our *sanctification* (Tit 2.11-14). Our daily *strength* comes to us through God's grace (2 Cor 12.9; 2 Tim 2.1); and all our *service* to God is all of his grace (Rom 12.6; 1 Pet 4.10; Eph 4.7). Even our *financial giving* is a work of his grace in our lives (2 Cor 8.1-7). And God's amazing grace to us, quite literally, has the last word! The last verse of the Bible reads like this: *The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people, Amen* (Rev 21.22).

Our chosen verses also speak of

➤ **Our great hope as Christians**: *The God of all grace has called you to his eternal glory in Christ*. We ourselves will be glorified on the day of Christ's return, as we are transformed to become like him in every way (Col 3.4; 1 John 3.2; Phil 3.20-21). And we will then bask in his matchless glory forever (Rev 21.10-11,23), in fulfilment of his express desire: *Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory* (John 17.24).

Our chosen verses then speak about

➤ **Our present experience of suffering** (*after you have suffered a little while*). Peter's first letter contains no fewer than 17 references to suffering, reminding us that suffering is an integral part of a normal Christian life.

- It's a *universal experience* for God's people (1 Pet 5.9), which shouldn't take us by surprise (4.13-16).
- Sometimes, we may suffer *unjustly* (2.19-20). Whenever we do so, we should remember the example Jesus has set us; he committed his cause

to God, rather than resorting to threats or retaliation (2.23).

- In this way, *our suffering can serve God's purposes*, refining our faith (1.6-7), proving our loyalty to Christ (4.16), and our true dependence on God at all times (4.19).
- Thankfully, although suffering is always a *painful experience* (1.6; 2.19; 4.12) ...
- it is also a *passing experience* (1.6; 5.10). God's goal is eternal glory for us (2 Cor 4.16-18).

Next, our chosen verses speak of

➤ **God's promise to us for the future**: *God himself will restore you, and make you strong, firm and steadfast*. Suffering can often leave us feeling battered and bruised. But Jesus is in the restoration business. In fact, he's a master at it, as Peter himself could testify (Luke 22.31-34, 56-62; John 21.15-17). God's desire and design is always to make us stronger and more resolute as a result of what we suffer, not weaker.

And so our chosen verses conclude with

➤ **Our resultant doxology of praise to God**: *to him be the power forever and ever, Amen*. I trust and pray that we will have plenty to praise God for as these verses encourage us, reassure us, and inspire us all during 2009.

Baptism Service, 25th January

On the last Sunday evening of this month, we have the privilege of holding a Baptism Service for one of our friends from overseas. He will be telling us about his country of origin and his fascinating journey to faith at our monthly *International Fellowship Tea*, at 5.30pm, before the service takes place at 6.30pm. Please make the Tea and Baptism Service a priority for yourself, to support our friend who is to be baptised; and use both events as an opportunity to invite guests along, too.



Hear what the Spirit has to say to the Churches

In our Small Groups this term (from February to Easter), we are going to be exploring what it means to be a *Spirit-led Church*.

In **Romans 8.14**, Paul tells us that *those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God*. The order of his words is significant. He doesn't say, "*Sons of God are led by the Spirit of God*," although this is undoubtedly true (see **Luke 4.1**). Rather, he is indicating that our willingness to be led by God's Spirit is sure evidence of our true sonship.

But *how* does God's Spirit lead us, individually and also corporately? Primarily, he uses the Scriptures. **God's Spirit leads God's people through God's Word**. That's why, to discover what it means to be a Spirit-led Church, we must study the Scriptures together.

So, we will be looking at the letters our Lord Jesus Christ sent to seven specific churches in what, today, we call the region of south-west Turkey. Each of the letters ends with the refrain, *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches* (Rev 2.7,11,17,29;3.6,13,22), echoing the words of Jesus recorded for us in Mathew 11.15;13.9,15-16,43; Mark 8.18; and Luke 14.35 (and parallel passages).

Although these letters were written to specific geographical locations, and contain many historical allusions to the particular circumstances of John's day, they have been preserved in the Scriptures because of their timeless value. The principles, which they contain, are relevant to *every* church in every generation and geographical location. Readers of the letters are called to hear what the Spirit has to say to *all* the churches (the word is plural in the refrain at the end of each letter), not just to their own particular church fellowship (cf Col 4.16).

So, if we want to know in practice what it means to be a Spirit-led Church, we must listen carefully to what God's Spirit has to say to us through God's Word, and then put it into practice with his help.

Some people see in these letters, taken together, a rounded picture of Christ's ideals for his churches. The majestic risen, ascended, exalted and glorified Lord Jesus Christ, pictured for us so graphically in Rev 1.12-18, patrols, inspects and supervises all of his churches (1.12-13,20;2.1). He has an intimate knowledge of each of them, and pinpoints seven marks that he would like to see in every church fellowship:

- a passionate love for Jesus;
- a willingness to suffer for him;

- truth in every aspect of doctrine;
- holiness of lifestyle;
- a commitment to mission;
- genuine sincerity; and
- a complete reliance on him for everything.

We also see in these letters, churches that are being destroyed by sin, error and lethargy from within, and by troubles and persecution from without.

Each of the seven letters of Revelation 2-3 follows a similar pattern.

(a) An Announcement of the letter's recipient and author.

- The *recipients* vary according to the location of the churches (the word *angel* in the introduction to each letter simply means God's messenger; this could refer to the letter's postman, or more likely, to the pastor of each church, who is entrusted with delivering the message to his congregation).
- The *author* of each letter is the same - our risen, exalted and glorified Lord Jesus Christ. He introduces himself to the churches in a variety of ways, according to the condition and situation of each church. For in seeking to become a more Spirit-led Church, it is vital for us to begin with a proper appreciation of the true awesomeness of our Lord Jesus Christ, as the true head of every individual church fellowship.

(b) An Analysis of the situation in each church.

- Jesus reveals *he knows* all about each individual church fellowship, its strengths and weaknesses, as he walks amongst them on his tour of inspection (2.1).
- He *commends* the churches for what they are getting right, and *rebukes* them for what they are doing wrong.

(c) An Action Plan

- This will sometimes contain a *call to repentance*; at other times, it will focus on the need for *perseverance*.

(d) An Appetiser

- These come in the form of wonderful promises and assurances, and provide great incentives to heed the instructions given in the action plan.

So, plan to be a part of our Small Group structure over the coming weeks, so that we can lead together what it means to be a Spirit-led Church.

David Hunt