

# 1 CORINTHIANS 9:10

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Turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 9. In this chapter Paul asked a number of rhetorical questions to emphasize his rights as an apostle. He started in the first two verses by proving that he was an apostle. Then in verses 3 and following he began to defend his rights as an apostle. In verse 4–6 he asked three rhetorical questions that centered on his right to have financial support. In verse 4 he talked about his right to eat and drink. In verse 5 he talked about his right to have a believing wife who would travel with him. And in verse 6 he talked about his right to refrain from working. Now both Paul and Barnabas were single and chose to work with their hands to provide for themselves. But Paul's point here was that they had these rights, just like the other apostles.

Then in verse 7 Paul asked three more rhetorical questions, and in each one he gave an illustration to defend his right to receive support as an apostle. The first one was a soldier, the second one was a farmer, and the third one was a shepherd. The soldier got his expenses covered, the farmer got to eat some fruit from his vineyard, and the shepherd got to drink some of the milk that came from the flock. So this verse proves from everyday life that Paul had the right to receive financial support for his ministry as an apostle. But it's easy to see how some people at this point might have thought that Paul's argument was weak. That's why he asked another rhetorical question in verse 8: "Am I saying this from a human perspective?" And the obvious answer to this question is "no."

Now there was nothing wrong with Paul using those illustrations. But Paul knew that his position was weak if he was relying only on those human illustrations. He didn't want to speak just from a human perspective. So at the end of verse 8 he asked another rhetorical question: "Doesn't the law also say the same thing?" So in the second question Paul was giving us a different perspective on the same topic. And the obvious answer to this question is "yes." The law says the same thing as the human illustrations that Paul gave earlier. And the next verse tells us which law he was talking about. Look at the beginning of verse 9: "For it is written in the law of Moses, Do not muzzle an ox while it treads out grain." So Paul was talking about the set of laws that God gave to the Israelites through Moses on Mount Sinai.

And Paul went on to give us a quote from the law of Moses. This statement comes from Deuteronomy 25:4, and in this verse Moses commanded the Israelites not to muzzle an ox. A muzzle is basically a device that we put over the mouth of an animal to keep it from opening its mouth. So a muzzle keeps an animal from biting people, but it also stops the animal from eating as well. And that's clearly the focus in this verse. The Israelites were not to muzzle an ox while it treads out grain. Now the Greek word for treading out grain literally means "to thresh." During ancient times an ox was used to pull a huge stone

over grain that was collected and put on a threshing floor. And this stone would separate the kernels of grain from the stalks that they were attached to. Then the grain could be used to bake bread.

So now we can understand why people would have muzzled an ox in this situation. The ox was right there with the grain! And people would not have wanted the ox to eat a bunch of their grain while it was working. After all, the people wanted that grain for themselves! And even if they didn't eat it, they could still sell it to make money. So there would have been a strong temptation to muzzle the ox. But Moses told the Israelites not to stop the ox from eating as it worked. After all, oxen need to eat just like people do. And if an ox gets hungry while it's working, why not let it eat some of the grain? That will keep the ox happy and help it to continue working effectively. So Moses was basically telling the Israelites to treat their oxen with kindness.

But why did Paul quote this statement here in 1 Corinthians 9:9? After all, he wasn't focused on oxen in this passage. But he went on to explain how we should understand this statement. Look at what he said at the end of verse 9: "Is God really concerned about oxen?" And the obvious answer to this question is "no." So Paul seemed to be saying that God didn't care about oxen. But we know from other Scripture passages that God cares about animals. Psalm 147:9 says that God "provides the animals with their food, and the young ravens what they cry for." In Matthew 6:26 Jesus said, "Consider the birds of the sky: They don't sow or reap or gather into barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Aren't you worth more than they?" In Luke 12:6 Jesus said, "Aren't five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten in God's sight."

So Paul's rhetorical question at the end of 1 Corinthians 9:9 is rather confusing. Why would he imply that God is not concerned about oxen? I think the solution here is that Paul was simply arguing from the lesser to the greater. He was saying that God doesn't just care about oxen but that he cares about people as well. And this fact was obvious even back in the book of Deuteronomy, because the statement that Paul quoted is in a section of laws about human relationships. Most of the commands in that passage were about how to treat others, especially those who were needy. So Moses was clearly talking about how to treat oxen in this statement. But he was implying that we should treat other people even better. If we should show some kindness to our animals, then we should certainly be kind to our fellow human beings as well. And this is what Paul was focused on when he quoted this statement.

Now let's look at the next verse in 1 Corinthians 9. We're ready to cover some new material. Look at what Paul wrote in verse 10: "Isn't he really saying it for our sake? Yes, this is written for our sake, because he who plows ought to plow in hope, and he who threshes should thresh in hope of sharing the crop." At the beginning of this verse we have yet another rhetorical question. It's the fourteenth one that we've seen in this chapter so far. And hopefully you remember that a rhetorical question is one that has an obvious answer. So Paul wasn't asking all these questions because he was looking for the answers. He was asking them because he wanted his readers to stop and think more deeply about what he was talking about.

Now the Christian Standard Bible is actually missing a word at the very beginning of this verse, and so is the English Standard Version. But we can find this word in the Legacy Standard Bible and the New

American Standard Bible. It's the word "or," which is a literal translation of the first word in the Greek text. Now we've already seen this word used at the beginning of three questions earlier in this chapter. We saw it at the beginning of the question in verse 6 and the beginning of the third question in verse 7. It was also at the beginning of the second question in verse 8, even though it's not translated in the Christian Standard Bible. Now we're seeing it again here in verse 10, and it has the same function as before. Paul was giving an alternative perspective compared to his question at the end of verse 9. In verse 9 he basically said that God wasn't concerned only about oxen. Then in verse 10 he showed who else God was concerned about.

Now the Christian Standard Bible starts this question in verse 10 with the word "isn't." And of course this word is a combination of the words "is" and "not." But there is no Greek word here that means "not." The Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible are more literal here. Then the Christian Standard Bible has the word "he." Now this word doesn't come directly from the Greek text either. But this word is implied by the Greek verb for saying, because this verb is third person singular. Now the subject could be masculine, feminine, or neuter. But every major translation gives us a masculine pronoun, and this interpretation makes sense. After all, Paul mentioned God in the previous question, and so it makes sense that he would still be talking about God in this question. That's why the Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible capitalize this pronoun.

Now the Greek verb here just means to say or speak. But what was Paul talking about here? What was God saying or speaking? The Christian Standard Bible gives us the word "it" after the verb, but this word doesn't come directly from the Greek text. That's why this word doesn't appear in the English Standard Version, the Legacy Standard Bible, or the New American Standard Bible. But this word is certainly implied, because God must have said something. And I think it's obvious that Paul was referring back to the quote in the previous verse. Now we know that Moses spoke those words to the Israelites right before his death and right before the people entered the promised land. But Paul was focused here on the fact that God was speaking through Moses. These words ultimately came from him.

But Paul didn't say that God spoke these words in the past. He used a present tense verb here, and this fact is reflected accurately in the Christian Standard Bible as well as the English Standard Version, the Legacy Standard Bible, and the New American Standard Bible. All four of these translations give us a present tense verb in English. Now this doesn't mean that God didn't speak these words through Moses long ago. But the point is that God was still speaking these words during Paul's time. And I think we can conclude that God is still speaking them to us today as well. The Greek present tense usually indicates a continuous action, and I think we can safely say that God is always speaking through his Word. He didn't just speak to his people in the past; he continues to speak to us today. All we need to do is open his Word and see what he has to say.

So Paul said that God was still speaking the words of Deuteronomy 25:4. But the focus of Paul's rhetorical question was on the phrase that comes last in our favorite translations. All four of them end with the phrase "for our sake." In the original Greek this phrase actually comes very close to the beginning of the question. That's not where we would expect to see it, but Paul moved it forward in the sentence for em-

phasis. So Paul was asking whether God was speaking for our sake. Now when Paul used the word “our,” he could have been referring to just himself and Barnabas. Or he could have been referring to all the apostles. But I think it’s more likely that he was referring to all people. After all, he was talking about oxen at the end of verse 9, and so it makes sense that he was making a comparison between oxen and people in general. And this conclusion fits nicely with the rest of verse 10 as well.

But before we move on to rest of the verse, there’s one more word in this question that we need to cover. The Christian Standard Bible has the word “really” right before the word “saying.” Now other translations have different words here. The Legacy Standard Bible has the word “altogether,” and the New American Standard Bible has the word “entirely.” But these words make it sound like God is speaking only about people and not about oxen as well. And we’ve already concluded that this view is incorrect. So the Christian Standard Bible does a better job with the word “really,” and the English Standard Version is probably even better with the word “certainly.” These words are emphasizing that God is not just speaking about oxen in Deuteronomy 25:4. He’s also speaking about people. His words about how we treat oxen have important ramifications for how we treat people as well.

So I think it’s obvious that the answer to Paul’s question here is “yes.” But if there’s any doubt in our minds, all we have to do is keep reading to get confirmation. After all, the next sentence starts with the word “yes.” So Paul was removing any doubt about how we should answer this rhetorical question. But the Greek word here for yes isn’t the normal Greek word that means “yes.” This word is actually the one that usually means “for.” We just saw it at the beginning of verse 9. It normally introduces an explanation of what comes before it. But sometimes this word communicates a strong affirmation. So in these cases it can be translated with the word “yes” or the word “indeed.” And this is clearly the nuance that Paul was intending here.

But Paul didn’t just give one word here to clarify the answer to his question. He gave us a series of words. He said, “Yes, this is written for our sake.” Now in the Christian Standard Bible this statement has too much emphasis, because there’s actually no Greek word here that means “this.” There’s just a third person singular verb that doesn’t have a separate word to go with it as the subject. We just saw the same thing in the question earlier in this verse. So in this case the subject could be masculine, feminine, or neuter. And we can choose from the words “he,” “she,” and “it.” Now if you look at the English Standard Version, the Legacy Standard Bible, and the New American Standard Bible, you can see that they all have the same word here. They all have the word “it.”

And this word makes sense, because the Greek verb here means “to write.” Now we would think that the subject of this verb would be a person and not a thing. After all, we usually talk about people writing something down. But this verb is in the passive voice. It’s the same verb that we saw at the beginning of verse 9, and that verb was in the passive voice as well. And hopefully you remember that the passive voice just means that the subject of the verb receives the action of the verb instead of doing the action of the verb. So in this case the subject is not doing the writing. Instead the subject is being written. And the word “it” must be pointing backward to the quoted statement in the previous verse. Paul was continuing to talk about his citation of Deuteronomy 25:4.

Now the Christian Standard Bible has the phrase “is written,” which makes it sound like Paul used this verb in the present tense, just like he did with the verb in the question earlier in this verse. But if you look at the English Standard Version, the Legacy Standard Bible, and the New American Standard Bible, you’ll see that they all have the phrase “was written.” This phrase is a more literal translation, because Paul used the Greek aorist tense here. And the aorist tense is roughly equivalent to our simple past tense in English. So Paul was emphasizing that this statement he quoted was written down in the past. Moses wrote it down 1,400 years before Paul wrote this letter. So the question earlier in this verse focuses on the present and how God was still speaking this quotation, but the follow-up statement at the end of the verse focuses on the past and how Moses wrote it down long ago. There’s a perfect balance here between the divine and human authorship of Scripture.

But Paul continued this statement by saying that the quotation was written for our sake. We just saw this phrase in the question earlier in this verse. In both places Paul used the exact same phrase in the original Greek. And in both places he put this phrase at the beginning of the sentence for emphasis. Now most of our translations change the word order so that the verse is more readable. But the Legacy Standard Bible preserves the word order so that you can see the emphasis. It says, “Yes, for our sake it was written.” That’s a very literal translation of the Greek text. So once again the focus is on the fact that the quoted statement is ultimately about people. It was written more for our benefit than it was for the benefit of oxen.

Now the rest of this verse tells us why this quoted statement was written ultimately for our sake. The next word here is “because,” which introduces the reason for what Paul just said. And there are two parts to this reason. The first one is that “he who plows ought to plow in hope.” Now the Greek word for plows is used twice here. It’s actually a verb, but it’s not used as a main verb in either case. The first one is a participle that’s used as the subject of the main verb. And the second one is an infinitive that complements the main verb. But in both cases this word is referring to the action of plowing. Now in Minnesota where I grew up, we used the word “plowing” to refer to plowing snow in the winter. But they didn’t have snow plows 2,000 years ago. So Paul must have been talking about farmers plowing the soil. And this just means that they would dig up the ground to prepare for planting seeds.

Now the phrase “he who plows” in the Christian Standard Bible is probably too narrow. The Greek participle is indeed masculine, but it should probably be understood generically to refer to a person of either gender. So it would be better to say “the one who plows.” Now the English Standard Version, the Legacy Standard Bible, and the New American Standard Bible all have the word “plowman.” But this word is not just too restrictive. It also changes the verb to a noun. Now the Greek participle is certainly referring to a person here. But it’s emphasizing that this person does the action of plowing. And the participle is in the present tense, which stresses that this action is repeated. This person plowed the soil over and over as a habit of life.

Now the main verb here is the word “ought.” And the original Greek verb here normally communicates the idea of being under an obligation. For example, Paul used this word in Romans 15. Listen to what he wrote in verse 1: “Now we who are strong have an obligation to bear the weaknesses of those without strength, and not to please ourselves.” So here in 1 Corinthians 9:10 Paul was also talking about having an

obligation. He said that the one who plows is obligated to plow in a certain way. He's supposed to plow "in hope." Now the Greek word for hope here is a very important term. It's used 53 times in the New Testament, but 36 of them are found in Paul's letters. So he used this word quite a bit.

Now Paul only used this word three times in 1 Corinthians, and two of them are in this verse. But the third one is pretty famous. Look at what Paul wrote in chapter 13 and verse 13: "Now these three remain: faith, hope, and love—but the greatest of these is love." Now most Christians understand how important love and faith are. We can't be saved without faith, and as Christians we need to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves. In fact, those are the two most important commands in the law of Moses according to Jesus. But it's easy for us to overlook how important hope is. Paul included it alongside faith and love as three of the most important attitudes for a Christian to have.

And this isn't the only place where we see these three attributes together. They're also found in 1 Thessalonians 1. Look at what Paul wrote in verse 3: "We recall, in the presence of our God and Father, your work produced by faith, your labor motivated by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." So in this verse we learn a bit about how these three attributes work in the Christian life. First he said that our faith produces good works. A faith that doesn't produce works is a dead faith, like James wrote in chapter 2 of his letter. Then Paul said that our labor is motivated by love. When we love others like we should, it motivates us to serve them and meet their needs. Then Paul said that our endurance is inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. So the reason we can endure the difficulties of this life is that we have hope in Jesus.

And Paul talked more about this hope in his letter to Titus. In chapter 1 and verse 2 he referred to the hope of eternal life, and he did the same thing in chapter 3 and verse 7. But in between these two references he explained what will happen to ensure that we have eternal life. Look at what Paul wrote in chapter 2 and verse 13. He talked about waiting "for the blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ." So we can have hope because Jesus is coming back in all his glory. This is how we can know that we will experience eternal life. So the Greek word for hope isn't talking a possibility or a wish. That's how we normally use the English word "hope." We talk about how we hope our favorite team will win a big game. But the Greek word for hope refers to a confident expectation. We know with absolute certainty that Jesus is coming back and that we will experience eternal life.

But what kind of hope was Paul talking about in 1 Corinthians 9:10? He didn't clarify for us, but I think he expected us to understand that he was talking about the harvest. The person who plows has a confident expectation that his work will eventually lead to a harvest. That's the ultimate goal of plowing. And Paul said something similar when he gave the second part of the reason at the end of the verse. He said that "he who threshes should thresh in hope of sharing the crop." The Greek word for threshing is the same one that we saw in the previous verse. It's parallel to the plowing earlier in the verse. It's a participle that refers to the person who threshes.

Now the phrase "should thresh" doesn't come directly from the Greek text. But it's based on the parallel statement earlier in the verse. Once again Paul was talking about an obligation to do something. The per-

son who threshes has an obligation to thresh in hope. And Paul did use the Greek word for hope again here. But this time he gave the content of the hope for clarification. He said that the hope is in sharing the crop. The Greek word for sharing is used eight times in the New Testament. Three of them are in Hebrews, and all five of the others are here in 1 Corinthians. We're looking at the first occurrence of the word in this letter. And this word just means to share or participate in something.

Now the Christian Standard Bible has the word "crop," but this word doesn't come directly from the Greek text. However, it's strongly implied by the context. Paul was saying that the one who plows and the one who threshes have an obligation to do their work with the confident expectation that there will be a harvest and that they will get a share of it. Now Paul's going to apply this illustration to his own situation in the next verse. But for now we can see the principle that work in this world should be rewarded. That's true for animals, and it's true for people as well. When we have a job, we work with the expectation that we will be paid for our work. And that's not a bad thing at all. It's the way that God created us to function. And that's true in the spiritual realm as well. God promises to reward those who serve him faithfully. So let's look forward to the rewards that God has in store for us. They're going to be better than we could ever imagine! Let's close in prayer.