

Prayer

Thank You, Holy and Almighty God, for the day of worship we enjoy today. May we continue to worship you every week in fellowship with others, and privately every day of our lives. May this be our unstinting witness to the faithfulness of our God who loves us and who has laid down His life for us. We worship You, Holy and Almighty God: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

(Offering alternatives that can broaden your experience of prayer)

Prayer ideas

Go somewhere different to say your prayers today. Sometimes, moving our physical position can help us see things in a new light, even spiritual things!

On-going prayers

- **Pray for God to forgive his people their sins.** *Pray for any people you know who are troubled by persistent personal difficulties and sins, and pray for them. Pray that they will find a solution to their personal problems by trusting all to Christ.*
- *Give thanks for the challenges faced by God's people today*
- *Pray for the world in the fall out from the killing of Bin Laden. It is a complex issue, but one that God can help us with if we submit it to Him*

Meditation

Breathe on us, Holy Spirit; breathe.

May we feel this breeze that comes from heaven,
And breathe more deeply of the things of God.

May we accept this offer of unconditional love,
Which sweeps away our troubles and fears.

May we rejoice in the challenge of the Spirit's power,
To achieve the impossible within our world.

May we receive the unconditional gifts of God,
The guarantee of faith, the means of ministry.

May we be comforted by the Spirit's presence,
God's strength to help and touch of healing.

May we wonder at the mystery of the Spirit's power
Ecstatic at this gift far greater than ourselves.

Breathe on us, Holy Spirit; breathe.

Bible passage - Hebrews 4:1-5

¹ We should be concerned therefore, whilst the promise of entering into his rest remains, lest any of you think you have failed to find it. ² For the good news has indeed come to us just as it has to them; but the message they heard did them no good, because they did not put together what they heard with their faith. ³ Now, we who have believed are entering into that rest, as He (God) has said, 'As in my anger I swore, "They shall not enter my rest,"' even though His work was completed at the foundation of the world. ⁴ For it says about the seventh day in one place as follows, 'And God rested on the seventh day from all his works;' ⁵ even though, in the passage above it says, 'They shall not enter my rest.'

Bible Study

Review

This passage of Scripture is a conundrum, and you would be forgiven for wondering what it means! Its complexity is added to by the fact that there are different versions of this passage in some of the earliest Greek manuscripts in possession, and there have been arguments about this text from the time of the early church onwards! How therefore can we understand this passage in a brief study such as this?

To begin with, we must understand what the writer of Hebrews is trying to say in this part of his letter. You may remember from yesterday's passage that he was concerned about people within the church who were becoming stubborn and sinful, like the Old Testament people of God who had been refused entry into the Promised Land, *'who will not enter my rest'* (3:19). He also seems to be concerned about a different form of unbelief. He speaks of it in verse 1, where he refers to people *'who think they have failed to find it'* (where 'it' is the 'rest' of those who find faith in God). This means people who think that they are not good enough to receive God's great promises, and consequently set themselves up for spiritual failure. Today, we recognise this as a typical characteristic of people with low self esteem, but Hebrews is not concerned about people's image, it is only concerned about the soul's eternal destiny.

In complete contrast to those who might reject the Old Testament stories as having no value (see yesterday), others thought the opposite! They suggested that if Israel could not enter God's rest (the Promised Land) because of her stubbornness, then something similar was true of the church, and there would always be some who were not good enough to enter into 'the rest' of God's eternal life. They argued that since God had rejected some of His people in the past (after the Exodus), so God would reject some in favour of others despite their faith in Jesus' work of redemption on the Cross! Such an attitude is found today amongst those who believe they are 'not good enough' to receive communion, for example, or feel that they will never be saved even though they claim to believe the message of the Gospel. In answer to this, Hebrews begins a long and complicated argument to disprove this dangerous presumption.

To begin with, Hebrews says that God planned His 'rest' at the beginning of creation (see verse 4), where the Sabbath day is clearly intended to signify not just one day of rest in seven, but the eternal destiny of all God's people, found through the Saviour, Jesus Christ (see previously in Hebrews 3). However, some do not find that eternal Sabbath, or 'rest', because they have heard the message of God, but have not taken it to heart; *'But the message they heard did them no good, because they did not put together what they heard with their faith'* (4:2). The issue, says Hebrews, is not whether or not God accepts people, but whether or not people put their faith into practice! Ultimately, those who do not accept what God has done for them, His redemption, His counsel or His teaching, turn away from Him by their own choice; this is not God's fault.

In this way, Hebrews says plainly that although our eternal destiny is won by Christ, the Christian must also put some effort into pursuing a life of faith. Scripture is relatively straight about what such effort should include, for Jesus Himself exhorted His followers to 'love one another' (John 13:34f.) and 'preach the Gospel' (Matt 28:19). His teaching contains much more! There is no place in Scripture for the belief that we are saved by means of our faith, for we have been saved by the grace of God in the work of Jesus Christ and not by anything we do or say. Of course, faith is the only way for us to gain access that grace, but Christ Himself is the source of our salvation, and we accept this through faith.

The passage contains different quotes from Psalm 95:11 and Genesis 2:3, which serve to clarify these points; these will be studied later. The whole passage strives to persuade the reader that when we see problems in the life of the church, it is not God who is at fault. Since the beginning of time, He has indeed been equitable, fair, and available for all people, even though some have turned away from Him. The letter to the Hebrews speaks here to those within the church who have a particular negative impact upon its life, by suggesting that they are not good enough for God. Such people promote doubt within the church about whether God will honour his promise to give eternal 'rest' to all who believe in Him. Unfortunately, some people still believe this today, and it is just as destructive now as it was then!

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Read through the text again, and discuss this in your group; what is the author trying to say in this passage?

2. Why is it that some people in the church today shy away from the promises of their God, such as freedom from the power of sin, or the promises of blessing?
3. As a Christian, do you feel that you are heading for God's 'Promised Rest', of eternal life?

Personal comments by author

Every church I have ever had anything to do with has had amongst its members people who have refused to take communion because they say they are 'not good enough', or who have stood back from some aspects of Christian faith such as the work of the Holy Spirit because they 'don't feel worthy'; and I could go on. We try to be charitable towards all people, but there is a hard question to ask. Some people insist upon such attitudes and are unwilling to change, but at what point does this obstinacy represent a drain on the real life of God's people, the church? This discipleship issue will not go away!

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- **Something to think about:** *Have you ever been tempted to feel that you are 'not good enough?' If this is something from which you have suffered in the past, look back on this and reflect on how you were able to come out of this.*
- **Something to pray about:** *Pray to stand against the enemy of God, the devil, and against the way he manipulates people's faith. Pray for any people you know who have difficulty with their faith, and stand against the enemy who afflicts people with such unbelief.*

Final Prayer

Dear Jesus, save me from thinking I am any better than I am, but save me as well from thinking I am any worse than I am! Give me, I pray, a good and realistic assessment of my own faith so that I do not deceive either myself or others, and take my proper place in the life of God's people, the Church. AMEN
