

Prayer

Almighty God; You are our Creator and our Redeemer, and Your care for us extends far beyond our understanding or our reach. Give us the humility to accept that ultimately, we do not know all things, and that we may explore but never compete with Your supreme creative and saving power. May we honour You as the One from whom everything comes, and live as if we truly believe it. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

(Offering alternatives that can broaden your experience of prayer)

Prayer ideas

Make sure that you confess your sins to God today. Take time to get this right, and you will find that the day will become less of a burden to you.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for people in your local hospital.** *Pray for the many workers whose job is to enable the whole institution of a hospital to work smoothly. Pray for any you know personally, and pray that the hospital will continue to have good industrial relationships with its workers, for the sake of all.*
- *Praise God for the opportunities you have to enjoy life this day*
- *Pray for those who are underprivileged, and who do not have the means to make a better life for themselves. Pray for political leaders who have the responsibility of facing such problems.*

Meditation

As we begin our work today;

- Give us a heart to seek peace with each other;
- Give us a mind to seek the truth with each other;
- Give us the strength to work well with each other;
- Give us the hope to have confidence in each other;
- Give us such love that is ready to forgive one another;
- Give us a desire to share fully with one another;
- Give us compassion to care properly for one another;
- Give us the emotions to truly feel for each other;

And so may we honour You this day.

Bible passage - Hebrews 6:1-8

¹ Therefore let us leave the basic teachings about Christ and proceed towards maturity, not repeatedly laying the foundations of repentance from deeds which lead to death, of faith in God, ² baptismal instruction, laying on of hands, resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment, ³ though we will do this, if it is what God wishes. ⁴ It is not possible for those who were once enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, shared in the Holy Spirit, ⁵ and tasted the goodness of the God's word and the powers of the coming age, ⁶ to be brought back to again to repentance after they have fallen away! They are themselves crucifying the Son of God again, and are holding him up to contempt! ⁷ Ground that soaks up rain which has repeatedly fallen on it and produces a crop useful to those for whom it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. ⁸ But if it produces thorns and thistles, it is worthless and close to being cursed. In the end, it will be burned.

Bible Study

Review

If yesterday's passage cautioned God's people about the dangers of not advancing beyond the 'milk' of Christian teaching to the 'solid food' (5:11-14), then this passage jumps much further ahead. It warns God's people not to stray from the true faith and forget the things of God. Although the word is not used here, part of our passage (6:4-6) describes what the early church came to describe as 'apostasy', meaning complete abandonment of faith. As a whole, the passage says that when faith has been rejected by those who were once fully involved in the Body of Christ and who received its benefits (when they have become 'apostate'), then there is no formal way back into the fellowship of the church. The letter is decisive about this, saying that this would be like attempting to crucify our Lord again for the sake our personal convenience (6:6), when we previously rejected those benefits of His death that we had already knowingly accepted.

You will not be surprised that there is a great deal of controversy about this passage of Scripture. Many people feel that the teaching of Christ, whilst as absolute as this passage about the demands of true faith, always offer hope to those who have 'fallen along the way'. They feel that the language of this passage appears to give no hope to those who might wish to 'return to the fold' of Christian fellowship having strayed. This is not an easy issue, and it has created much division within the Church from the earliest of times. I cannot give a complete explanation of this in a short Bible study; but a brief explanation of some of this may be helpful.

Hebrews appears to equate backsliding with rejecting the basic 'milk' of God's Word. The first three verses add to what we have read previously, by telling us what constitutes this basic teaching. The list mentions teaching in preparation for baptism, and highlights repentance, faith, the resurrection, eternal judgement and the 'laying on of hands'. We may consider some parts of this list as being like 'solid food', but Hebrews certainly classes it as 'milk'! The writer states firmly that those in an established church should not need to repeat such basic teaching if they really want to grow; 'though we will do this if it is what God wishes' (6:3)! Hebrews then sets down its challenge to all believers; if we have professed faith in Christ, been taught and indeed taken part in the spiritual gifts and activities of God's Church, then there are dire consequences if we reject what we once fully accepted and enjoyed (6:4-6). Indeed, there can be no return if we subsequently choose to go our own way in full knowledge of what we are rejecting. The point is reinforced by a simple agricultural example in the last two verses of our passage (6:7,8).

In order to understand what Hebrews is saying, I shall firstly suggest some of those for whom this passage does not apply. It does not apply to the many thousands of people, if not millions, who have experienced Christianity as a 'religion' and accepted some degree of faith, but whose lives have led them on such a difficult path, that for countless personal and pastoral reasons, they been 'in and out' of the church throughout their lives because of various misunderstandings. Neither does it apply to those who are committed Christians, but who discover that they have inadvertently 'missed the mark' in some quite serious matters, and sincerely seek forgiveness. Such people, and many others, need help either to understand the basic Christian message or to apply it in ways they had not understood. In my view, this passage is designed to stop the Church being either being regarded as or presented as some kind of free 'option'; a religious choice from which people can freely opt in or out as they wish, or as the circumstances of their lives dictate. It is this attitude towards Christian faith that treats the death of Christ as a personal convenience (6:6).

Hebrews was written against the backdrop of the growth of the early church, and a culture in which people switched and changed religious affiliations freely. The letter warns against this, just as it warns us today that we cannot just do what we want with God's church and still call ourselves Christians. The Church is God's, and it is not ours to play with as we choose. God does not turn away the sincere seeker, but He abhors attitudes that pay around with what He has done through Jesus to save the world! I know that some may regard even this as controversial, and there is much that I have not said by way of explanation of this text. However, I hope this will at least give some understanding to a passage of Scripture that is genuinely difficult to interpret.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss in your group whether you find this passage of Scripture disturbing or difficult; and if so, why?
2. Does God ever turn away a truly repentant sinner? Is there any sin which will not be forgiven?
3. In what ways does the church today present itself like a religious option rather than the truth about God?

Personal comments by author

This passage has taken me quite a few hours to translate, research and write! That is no justification for my views, but the longer I have spent with this passage, the more I am fascinated by it. It is one of the sternest warnings about letting go of the treasure of faith to be found within God's Word, and yet it wonderfully describes the benefits of faith and the life of God's people the Church! This is a passage that is capable of yielding much, so we must reflect upon it and allow it to influence our lives.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- **Something to do:** Spend a little time thinking and praying about this passage. Look up other passages of scripture that come to mind as you read these devotions, and check out what they say.
- **Something to pray about:** Pray for those who find it hard to accept the teaching of the church for whatever reasons. Pray against the enemy who would keep them away from God's people, and pray against the faults within the church that keep people away.

Final Prayer

Take our prayers, Lord God, and use them as a channel of Your grace: take our work, Lord God, and use it as a channel of care within the world: take our passion, Lord God, and use it to create love and hope within this troubled world. We ask You to do these things, Lord God, because You can do more with our gifts and graces than we can ever imagine: AMEN
