

Prayer

Lord God, we praise You for all that Jesus Christ has done for us. We thank You for the love and care we receive from others in Christian fellowship. We are grateful for the heavenly support you give us throughout the day, sometimes when we least expect it. We are indebted to the guidance and empowering of Your Holy Spirit, who is constantly ready to help us. Lord God, we praise You for the faithfulness of Your love. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

(Offering alternatives that can broaden your experience of prayer)

Prayer ideas

Today, look out for the Lord's voice, speaking to you through other people. Listen not just for His voice in the words of people you like, but also in people you find difficult, or in situations that are hard.

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.*
- *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*
- *Give thanks to God for the gifts of life, love and joy*

Meditation

(a testimony of faith in God based upon Psalm 49)

Hear this, all you who live in this world;
Both low and high, both rich and poor:
Why should we fear in times of trouble?

Those around us trust in property and wealth,
But everyone stands before God the same;
People cannot buy everlasting life for themselves!

Fear not when others become rich and richer;
The grave has no luxury, and hell no bonus
For death always sniggers in the face of fortune!

Know that wisdom will die with the wise;
All of them will go, like animals and fools.
But God can draw the soul from its ultimate nightmare.

So have faith in God, who redeems the grave!
Who would ransom each soul from sins distress!
Trust in Him whose blessing is an eternal home.

Bible passage - Hebrews 3:12-19

¹² Take care, dear friends, that none of you has an evil, unbelieving heart which turns away from the living God. ¹³ But encourage one another daily, while it is still 'today,' so that none of you may grow hardened by sin's deceit. ¹⁴ For we have a share in Christ, if only our original confidence is held firm to the end. ¹⁵ As it is said, 'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion.' ¹⁶ Now who was it who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all who left Egypt under Moses' leadership? ¹⁷ And who was He angry with for forty years? Was it not those who sinned, whose bodies came to grief in the desert? ¹⁸ And to whom did he

swear that they would not 'enter His rest', but to those who were disobedient? ¹⁹ So we can see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.

Bible Study

Review

This passage of Hebrews illustrates an important truth; though redeemed, God's people can never wholly escape the problem of sin. You will recall that in yesterday's text, the writer quoted extensively from Psalm 95, with its warning about the stubbornness of God's people in past generations, specifically at the time of the Exodus from Egypt (3:7-11). Because of their stubborn self centeredness, Israel sinned against God by refusing to follow His directions (Numbers 13,14), and as a result, that generation failed to reach the Promised Land (3:11). Hebrews urges Christians to learn from this sad event, and encourage one other in faith lest through stubbornness, sin and unbelief, they reap the same punishments as the ancient Israelites!

I have heard people argue that because we have now been cleansed from our sins by Jesus' death on the Cross, God's people no longer have such problems, and the Old Testament story therefore has little to teach us. Unfortunately, this is a short step away from arguing that the Old Testament is irrelevant! Moreover, such ideas are contradicted by our passage today. This scripture appeals directly to Christians to learn from the Old Testament and not make the mistakes of the Jews!

So, why is it that Christians have the same problem of on-going sin as the people of the Old Testament times? Sin has of course been defeated by Jesus, and by faith, we claim this eternal victory. But it remains a potent force within the world, and Christians must fight it if they are to be victorious in this life as well as the next. Now the writer of Hebrews knew this and warned the church of his own day not to repeat the mistakes of past and ignore the on-going power of sin. He knew of people in the church who held on to the strict religiosity of Judaism instead of following the path of the Kingdom as taught by Jesus, and others were stubbornly traditional instead of being led the Spirit. He argued that such things could be dealt with by learning from Old Testament Scripture.

The writer explains that the sins of stubbornness, disobedience and unbelief are linked (3:12,13,15 etc), and the eventual consequence of such sin is physical and spiritual death (3:17). As was said in yesterday's passage and is repeated today, those who become trapped in self-centredness do not '*enter into His rest*' (3:11,18). Now, it hardly takes much observation on our part to notice that all the sins mentioned here are found today just as much as in the past. For example, rebellion against God can happen today when people follow preachers instead of their message, or become tied to traditions rather than allow God's Word to speak to them anew. Remember, the judgement of God never changes. Christ has died to save those who repent and turn from sin, not those who prefer to hold on in it!

Our passage begins with this appeal; '*dear friends, take care ...*' (3:12), for the writer is deeply concerned about how sin continues to affect God's people. But his suggested remedy is remarkably simple. He says that we should '*encourage one another daily*', as a matter of urgency (3:13). Secondly, we are to make sure our '*original confidence is held firm to the end*' (3:14), and thirdly, we must not '*harden our hearts*' (3:15). The urgency of this threefold call in Hebrews should be heard and not be taken lightly. This passage calls us to engage constructively in the mutual encouragement of faith, and to make sure that we have a proper grasp of the scriptural revelation by which we have been saved. Across all denominations and church fellowships, God's people are called to 'love one another' (John 13:34) and build each other up, not to tear each other down.

Satan has too many ways in which he can attack the church, and God's people need to be aware of this, and fight sin and evil. For example, leaders still gain personal followings rather than lead people to deeper faith, and committees still argue over matters according to personal feelings rather than the will of God. The Bible presents us with many stories capable of warning us about what is wrong in God's sight, and this is one of them. We cannot afford to ignore the warning that God's people may well have a problem with self centeredness and rebellion.

Our Lord's own faith and ministry was consistent from first to last. He gave his time constantly to the encouragement of the twelve disciples, and He gave his life for the will of the Father, and in the process, laying Himself aside. The writer of Hebrews, reinforces our call is to live according to the example of our Lord; nothing less.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. How does unbelief enter into the life of the church today, and how can God's people guard against this?
2. Are passage of the Old Testament like this a help or a hindrance in the quest for Christian faith?
3. Discuss how people can encourage each other in faith. To what extent does culture help or hinder faith in Jesus Christ?

Personal comments by author

This passage of Scripture encourages us to help each other show that we have a faith in God. There are many ways we can do this, and the principle way is by talking about what we believe. I have found that many people in the church struggle with their own faith because they do not speak to each other about spiritual things. This does not mean 'gossiping', it means trusting each other enough to speak about what is important to us. We should share our thoughts about health, for example, or talk about our most heartfelt desires for the life of the church and our own families. These things are important to each of us, and they need to be shared.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- **Something to do:** *Today, consider whether you have a role to play in encouraging the faith of someone else. You may already do this, just by doing what you do and being who you are. However, why not try and do God's will consciously?*
- **Something to talk about:** *Try to find moments when you can talk with other church people about what you can do to encourage faith within your fellowship, and so fulfil one of the calls from this great Scripture.*

Final Prayer

Dear Jesus, when the life of the church to which we belong becomes difficult, and we find it hard to understand all that is going on; give us the grace to persist in encouraging others in the love of Jesus and His saving grace. May we always make this our contribution to the life of the church; AMEN
