

Prayer

Lord God, I am grateful for all the help You have given me. You have placed within me the inner strength to deal with a great deal, but I am blessed to be able to face each challenge in the knowledge that I am not alone. I am Your child, precious and loved, and I have confidence that You will lead me in everything I must do according to Your eternal purposes for me. Give me the courage, I pray, to persist in faith to the end of my days: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

(Offering alternatives that can broaden your experience of prayer)

Prayer ideas

As you go through your day, make a note in a diary or some other suitable device, of when you are happy and laugh. At the end of the day, look back and see what has lifted your spirit. Praise God for these things, and if you have not laughed, ask the Lord why!

On-going prayers

- **Pray for the stability of the world.** *Pray for the coming years; we do not necessarily know what will happen, although some things are predictable, and what is unknown is surely in God's hands.*
- *Pray for the many people in this world who will today suffer some injury that will change their lives. Pray for those who help such people, in hospitals and churches and other charitable organisations*
- *Give thanks to God for his mercy, and make sure they stay that you have confessed your sins*

Meditation

Hear these words of the Lord God that are given to you today:
Listen to my voice and live.

Salvation is my gift to you, and what I ask in return, is faith;
Believe in me and live.

Redemption is the work I do, through Jesus Christ, my Son;
Do what is right and live.

Righteousness is what I declare, when good triumphs over evil;
Discern what is right and live.

Justification is the consequence of knowing sins forgiven;
Confess your past and live.

Sanctification is the glorious path of growth in the Holy Spirit;
Receive Him now and live

Holiness is the perfection of love to which my people aspire;
Look at me and live.

Glory is the unfathomable mystery of my presence, for all eternity;
Worship me and live.

Bible passage - Hebrews 4:6-11

⁶ Therefore since it is still open for some to enter it, and those who previously received the good news failed to enter it because of disobedience, ⁷ He has once more set a day, this very day; having spoken through David over a long period of time in the words already quoted, 'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.'⁸ For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about some other day.

⁹ So a Sabbath rest is still available for the people of God; ¹⁰ and those who enter God's rest will also stop from their efforts just as God did from his. ¹¹ So let us spare no effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fail because of the same kind of disobedience.

Bible Study

Review

This passage is the climax of the discussion of God's promised 'rest' in Hebrews. The subject has been with us since chapter 3 and dominates much of chapter 4. It should be obvious to us now that the author is using this term to illustrate what he means by salvation, but why would he do this? Before we can look further at this question, we ought to look carefully at what was believed about God 'rest', and how this is connected with the Sabbath.

The biblical evidence is relatively easy to follow. When God finished creation, he took delight in a day of rest on the seventh day, which He called the 'Sabbath Day'. Now Jewish people believed that the Exodus from Egypt and entry into the Promised Land was an earthly example of God's salvation and deliverance, and could be spoken of as an entry not merely into God's 'Promised Land', but into His 'Promised Rest'. Once Joshua had subdued the land, the people of Israel were able to enjoy this rest and worship the Lord in security (for example, see Joshua 23:1f.) However, the occupation of the land was not entirely successful and the people continued to be rebellious, and eventually, this resulted in punishment by God when the Assyrians and Babylonians destroyed Israel and Judah (see 2 Kings 24 onwards and 2 Chronicles 35,36).

Yet the writer of Hebrews is trying very hard to persuade Jewish people to become Christians. In his own day, Jewish people were sensitive to their own history and to what they believed about salvation, tied as it was to the events of the Exodus and the days of Moses. It is easy to see that many Jewish people found it hard to believe that there was any more salvation for them to receive; they may have admired Jesus but struggled to accept Him as 'Saviour'. This is why Hebrews spend so much time on this issue, urging the Jews to accept that God wanted to bless them far more than they realised (4:9). He knew that unless the Jewish people accepted Jesus as equal to and superior to the revelations they had already received through Moses at the time of the Exodus, then they would not receive God's blessing, that is, His 'rest'.

Our passage therefore urges 'Hebrew' readers to accept that the salvation found through Jesus Christ is indeed the ultimate destiny of all who seek God's 'Promised Rest'; he says, '*a Sabbath rest is still available for the people of God*' (4:9). These words sound strange to Gentile Christians (including ourselves) because they are addressed to Jewish people. This famous sentence should not be interpreted as a general encouragement to Christians after experiencing the problems of sin, rather, it encourages us to believe that despite the rejection of Christianity by some of the Jews, God still keeps open the door to their salvation. In this way, the writer of Hebrews maintains the same values as Paul, who in his letter to the Romans, says virtually the same thing. Speaking of Jewish people as being like branches of a vine that has been pruned, he holds out the hope of eventual salvation, using these words:

'Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God ... If they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. After all, if you were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these, the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree!' (Romans 11:22-24)

Perhaps the most important lessons that we can learn from this passage is this. We are urged to persist in our pursuit of salvation to the point of rising above cultural sensibilities; '*let us spare no effort to enter that rest*' (4:11). Faith has always been tough for some people, and it is certainly difficult for Jewish people today. Moreover, many Christians carry with them a considerable heritage of faith from the denomination or church fellowship in which they had been brought up. Just as this passage of Scripture urges Jewish people to rise above their tradition and accept the saving work of God through Jesus Christ, it urges us today to seek the highest gift of God's salvation. Colloquially, we might tell each other 'not to rest until we have found it', for in this case, this saying is precisely true!

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Do you find it helpful to think of the Gospel of salvation as an invitation to God's rest? What does this say to Gentiles, instead of Jews?

2. Look carefully at verse 10 and discuss in your group what this means
3. Do you believe that God will save the Jewish people just because they are Jews, and irrespective of what they have done on earth?

Personal comments by author

As I write this, I ask myself whether I truly experience the 'rest' which God wants me to have through trusting in Him. I wonder whether I have been so anxious to be working for the Lord that I have not perceived that salvation is like rest? Have I truly accepted His care and love? We know that Jesus has said that our lives will not be without trial and distress, but surely we can 'rest' in His love even in the most difficult of times. We need to see these broad brush-strokes of faith in the midst of life's experiences.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- **Something to pray about:** *Within your personal prayer time, ask the Lord whether you have been 'hard of heart' (4:7). Has there been some call for response at church to which you have not responded? Have you brushed aside the voice of God in your heart? We all face issues such as these, and the only way forward with them is to be open to God about them in confession.*
- **Something to do:** *How many Jewish people do you know? You may be surprised to discover that some of the people you know have Jewish heritage. In the course of the next few months, seek to find any Jewish people who live near you, or people of Jewish origins in your fellowship, and discuss this scripture with them.*

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, You have ascended to heaven and sent Your Holy Spirit to us on earth. May we always be ready to feel the touch of Your Spirit and follow the leading and empowering of the same Spirit, whatever the cost. Save us from hardness of heart which is satisfied with life as it is now, we pray. Thank You Lord Jesus: AMEN
