

Final Prayer

Heavenly Father; come into my life and do those miracles of grace by which I know Your hand is guiding and leading me in the right direction. And if I am not 'right' with You, please bring me to a place of repentance where I can be set free, and therefore find this glorious liberty: AMEN

Prayer

Stir within me, Holy Lord, the fire which warms my soul; feed it with the breeze of Your Spirit and breathe it into life. Make me glow with all the radiance of the faith within me, so that I may give testimony to Your truth, Your majesty, Your life and Your transforming power; and may I burn with love, the eternal fuel of Your magnificent Creation! Thank You, Holy Lord: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Education

Pray for children facing exams and tests. Pray about the way children are tested in schools, especially that results will be handled with greater care by schools and society.

On-going prayers

- *Lift to the Lord your prayers for this world and the planet's future*
- *Give thanks for the people of this world and pray for their salvation*
- *Pray that politicians will grasp the importance of people's real needs*

Please note that from today, one of the 'on-going' prayer topics will always reflect our concern for the future of the world God has made.

Meditation

Make time to follow the path of the Lord;
He has a place to take each one,
And none can know the destiny except by following.

Make time to seek the Lord and pray;
He rejoices in this private space,
For by it each can come to know His gracious will.

Make time to sing praise to the Lord;
He loves to hear the soul rejoice,
For it opens up the heart to be receptive to His truth.

Make time to include the Lord at home;
He loves His place in the family,
And blesses those who honour Him at home, in love.

Make time to be honest with the Lord;
He knows each one, He has made all,
And He completes life's promises, and grants His peace.

Bible Study - Hebrews 30-40

³⁰ *By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days.*

³¹ *By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.*

³² *What more can I say? Time prevents me from telling of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, and of David and Samuel and the prophets, ³³ who through*

faith conquered kingdoms, brought about justice, attained the promises, muzzled the mouths of lions, ³⁴ quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, found strength through weakness, became strong in war, and put foreign armies to flight. ³⁵ Women received back their dead by resurrection; whilst others were tortured and refused to accept release, so that they might obtain a greater resurrection. ³⁶ Others faced jeers and flogging, even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷ They were stoned to death, sawn in two, and killed by the sword; they went about in sheep and goat skins, destitute, persecuted, and tormented. ³⁸ The world was not worthy of them. They wandered about in deserts and mountains, in caves and holes in the ground.

³⁹ Yet although all of these were commended for their faith, they did not receive what was promised. ⁴⁰ This was because God planned something better, which was that they would only be made perfect together with us.

Review

This remarkable passage of Scripture comes at the end of a long chapter in Hebrews which provides a remarkable list of examples of the faith of the great people of Israel's past. In mentioning the great figures of Abraham (11:8-22) and Moses (11:23-31), the writer draws out the fact that they both endured great hardships and also took part in some of the great, awe-inspiring events of Israel's history. In this way, Hebrews explains that faith has two sides. On the one hand it describes the relationship these great people had with their God, and on the other hand, their faith enabled them to face the consequent difficulties and trials of their day. This is a simple but profound truth about faith, which is true for us, and is also the key to our understanding of the final part of Hebrews 11.

In our reading today, the writer of Hebrews sweeps impressively through some of the other great names of Israel's history (11:30-32), but then goes on to speak about these two aspects of faith, the glory of faith in Christ and of overcoming great difficulties. Firstly, he provides an impressive list of what was done in Israel by great Israelites, through the inspiration of their God, who 'through faith conquered kingdoms, brought about justice, attained the promises ... and put foreign armies to flight' (11:33,34). Within this list are some issues we do not readily relate to today, such as victory in war. However, we must remember that in ancient times, unless a nation was able to defend itself it would soon be eliminated from the map of the world by invasion. This remains potentially true, but most of us are shielded from this today by our political systems; that is, when they work properly! Despite this, there is much we can learn from this passage. We learn that faith in God, our Creator, lies behind our success in spiritual (if not physical) warfare, and that persistence in the face of the world's worst attacks brings the glory of knowing that we have served God's Kingdom and contribute to an eternal victory. Certainly, here is a passage of scripture that shows faith to be much more than 'what we think about God'.

The second half of the passage talks in shocking detail about the terrible things endured by people of faith as they have sought to stand for what is godly and what is right; they 'faced jeers and flogging ... they were stoned to death ... persecuted and tormented' (11:36,37). As the writer of Hebrews penned these words, he probably had in mind not just the well known stories of the Old Testament, such as Daniel and the lion's den (Daniel 6:10f.), or the terrible experiences of some of the prophets (e.g. Jer 37:11f. and 38). He was probably thinking of what was happening in his own day as Christians in parts of the Roman Empire experienced the wrath of state; 'jeers, flogging ... imprisonment' (all of them forms of persecution experienced by Paul and mentioned in his letters – see Phil 1:13f., 2 Cor 11:23 etc). This persecution was terrible, but Christ told his disciples that this was a characteristic of people of faith in the past and would continue for His followers in years to come (Matt

10:23, Luke 21:12 etc). But what was the point of this for the writer of Hebrews, and how does the endurance of trouble through faith fit together with the great achievements of faith previously mentioned?

The answer comes in two places within this passage. If you simply read the final few verses of this passage, everything seems rather obscure. The letter says that those who have endured great hardships may be commended for their faith, but they only receive the benefit of that faith in the age to come (see 11:39,40). By itself, this does not appear to be a very satisfying conclusion to what has been a powerful and eloquent section of Hebrews, but our difficulty is that the main point of the passage is found not here, but in the middle of the passage, in verse 35. Here, the writer explains that the ultimate reward of faith is resurrection. Although some people experienced a foretaste of resurrection before the time of Christ (as, for example, when Elisha raised the son of the Shunammite woman from the dead – see 2 Kings 4), the true resurrection was now become available through Christ, and through faith in Him alone! Such a prize was surely worth waiting for despite all manner of trials and persecution, whether of the past or the present.

The message of this whole chapter, therefore, is that the ultimate reward of faith is only found in resurrection, known now by faith, but ultimately in heaven. This alone makes sense of all we experience in this life, and it unites us with all the great people of faith who have gone before us, and also with those yet to come!

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. What great things have been done by faith in recent times, and by what suffering has this achieved?
2. What great persecutions are being experienced by people of faith in the world today?
3. Does the prospect of the 'resurrection from the dead' offer sufficient reason to trust God for all things? What else does faith mean apart from this?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

I have always been deeply affected by the stories of Christians of past generations who have experienced suffering for their faith, of a kind I can barely imagine. I never cease to be amazed by the evidence of hundreds of young missionaries who went to Africa knowing they would die in little more than a few weeks or months in the mid nineteenth century. They maintained a work for God that can never be evaluated, except in heaven. Stories such as these, whether in the Bible or in our traditions, need to be known, and part of what we pass on to future generations.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *The balance between our faith and the suffering we endure for Christ is not easy to define. For each of us it will be different. Look back through your life and write down those times when your life of faith has been positive, and those that have been negative. Do not expect these to balance out in this life!*
- *Pray for those who struggle with faith because they cannot understand suffering, and how it can be used by God for good.*