

Prayer

Holy Spirit, we praise You in the worship of this day. Thank You for Your works of power through our Saviour Jesus Christ, Thank You for the victory You have won in heavenly places to defeat Satan and establish salvation. Thank You for the peace we may have with God the Father, through Jesus Christ, and may we worship You, Holy Spirit, with the Father and the Son, for all eternity: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Sharing Bread and Wine

The most precious act of worship we can share is that which remembers the mealtimes and fellowship of Jesus with His disciples; especially the meal they shared the night before He died. Pray that God's people might rediscover the power and love of God within this simple meal, and find new ways to share what it means with the millions on our planet who do not know.

Meditation

I listened to the crowds, and heard the chant from long ago;
A chant which called for death, the death of God:
And helpless people chanted on, secure in numbers,
Declaring what they thought was 'liberty' and 'freedom'.

I listened to the Word, and heard its stories from long ago;
Tales which speak of life and death, and life again,
Giving people everywhere the chance to find themselves
Through perfect love, but only through the One who made them.

So, listening to the human crowd which still chants death to God,
The ignorant and confused still show their woeful ignorance:
But Jesus faces down the crowd; He says 'I cannot die, I have been raised.
Now come to me and grasp eternal life from within your earthly life.'

'Come, join me on the path through death which leads to life again;
The only true and perfect life, eternity, my precious gift to you.
Do not turn away and join the crowd signed up for death;
Keep close to Me; I love you.

Bible Study - Hebrews 10:26-31

²⁶ For if we go on sinning deliberately after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there is no longer any sacrifice left for sins; ²⁷ but a fearful prospect of judgment and raging fire which consumes the enemies of God. ²⁸ Anyone who has rejected the law of Moses dies without mercy 'on the testimony of two or three witnesses.' ²⁹ How much more severe punishment do you think will be deserved by those who have rejected the Son of God, blasphemed the blood of the covenant by which they were made holy, and insulted the Spirit of grace? ³⁰ For we know who it was who said, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay.' And again, 'The Lord will judge his people.' ³¹ It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Review

After the wonderfully inspiring message of the 'new and living way' found in the previous verses to this passage, what we have read comes as something of a shock. The extraordinary compassion and grace of God available to us all comes at a cost, and here, the letter to the Hebrews sets out something of that cost. This passage warns us that we cannot go back upon the path of faith we have travelled, and seek again the atoning death of Jesus for our sins. What is done is done, and if we have been forgiven our sins, then there is no reason for us to continue to live knowingly in sin.

The language of the text is sharp. If we continue to sin deliberately, knowing that something is evil, but trying to ignore it, then something is badly wrong. Verse 27 tells us that because Christ has died once, there is no further sacrifice we can appeal to for our subsequent sin, and we face the wrath of God with its full force; 'a fearful prospect of judgement and raging fire which

consumes the enemies of God' (10:27). After this, Hebrews talks about the Old Testament rule that when someone has been disobedient to one of the commandments of God, the evidence of 'two or three witnesses' (10:28) is sufficient for someone to be expelled from the community of the people of Israel (see Deut 17,6,7; 19:15) or even be killed. The letter continues; 'How much more' (10:29), will those who 'blaspheme the blood of the covenant ... and insult the spirit of grace' be judged by Almighty God!

In the face of this outburst, we have to be very careful, for within the text there are hints about what has worried the writer, and it is not to do with the sins we commonly come across today amongst God's people. Neither is the judgement described here a condemnation of people who find themselves trapped in personal sins from which they have found it well nigh impossible to escape. The letter is concerned about a particular deliberate type of sin which was an active problem in the life of the early church, and it needs some explaining.

Early Christians generally lived without much interference from the Roman State. From time to time, however, Roman governors would try to assess the loyalty of the people they ruled by requiring them to go to a Roman Temple and pour out a 'libation' (an offering of wine or sometimes animal blood) to the Emperor of Rome, thus respecting him as a god. From the point of view of the Roman governors, this was no more than a test of political allegiance, but you can imagine that for Christians, it was a difficult spiritual issue. If they did this, they 'blasphemed' Jesus by honouring someone else as god; if they did not, then they could get themselves killed, perhaps burned at the stake. Some Christians believed that it was all right to pour out these libations regularly, they argued that God would surely understand, and the Church, they believed, should accept them back after they had, in effect, worshipped the Emperor as God.

In the light of this, you will see that Hebrews told the early Christians that this was wrong, and someone who has accepted the atoning death of Jesus Christ could not pour out libations to the Emperor and just think that Jesus' death will cover this sin as well. This passage is not easy, but it would be wrong of us to try, too unthinkingly, to equate this ancient problem with commonly recognisable sin today. Perhaps the nearest we can get to it is the sin of accepting the belief that other faiths demonstrate a sufficient path to Almighty God, together with Jesus Christ. Such a belief would 'blaspheme' Jesus' sacrifice on the part of a Christian, for example.

We must leave the issue of the place of people of other faiths before God to another time, as the point in this passage of Hebrews is sin amongst Christians. Grievous, conscious and deliberate sins do exist today which deny the heart of our faith; they must be taken as seriously as those in this passage, and the Holy Spirit will show us what they are. We should not, however, use it to condemn people who have problems with sins of lifestyle or ignorance, or complex personal and spiritual issues. All of us who do not deliberately commit sin in the belief that God will automatically forgive us, need to confess our sins regularly and immediately we become aware that we have sinned. In this way, we return to the place of forgiveness Christ has already given us and avoid the sharp judgements within this text.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Do you believe that there are any sins which are 'unforgiveable'?
2. Can you think of any other sins which might fit the category of 'blasphemy' which is talked about by this passage?
3. How does the sin described in this passage compare with the 'unforgiveable sin' mentioned by Jesus in His teaching (Matt 12:31)

Discipleship

Whether or not you feel that this passage identifies sins which can prevent us from receiving God's gracious forgiveness, it does face us with many questions about the sincerity of faith and our discipleship. It is perhaps true that we take some things about the Christian life too lightly, and as a consequence our attitude towards the saving work of Christ on the Cross can be less than what it should. There is no part of your life or mine which the Lord does not love and for which He has not given everything so that it might be redeemed and come under His will. That is the reality of faith which breaks Satan's strongholds and establishes the Kingdom of God.

Final Prayer

Lift us, dear Lord and Father, into the heights of praise and worship; not only now, but throughout every part of our day and even in the dreams of our night-time. Raise our spirits so that other people around us can see that the Lord our God is with us, and we are His, to the praise and glory of Almighty God: AMEN