

## 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: Looking Ahead

Pray about the life of God's people, the Church. Ask the Lord to enliven His people so that they become known as having an active interest in the future of the world and the development of every feature of human life. May the people of God be at the forefront of social care and concern, of scientific research and medical care, and of every field of human endeavour.

## Meditation

I glory in the love You show me, Lord Jesus Christ.

You give me courage to withstand the struggles of life

When I'm overwhelmed by the smallest of problems:

You give me a heart to look out for the needs of others

Despite the temptations of living by my own agenda:

You give me strength to stand resolute in the Faith

And apply what I have learned about faithfulness:

You give me love when my compassion runs dry

The ability to forgive, when affronted by offence:

You give me the power to rise above the ordinary

To do greater things for You, and aspire to the best:

You give me real hope and a vision for the future

In which all things are complete in Your Kingdom:

I glory in the love You show me, Lord Jesus Christ.

## Bible Study - Hebrews 11:32-40

<sup>32</sup> *What more can I say? Time prevents me from telling of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, and of David and Samuel and the prophets,* <sup>33</sup> *who through faith conquered kingdoms, brought about justice, attained the promises, muzzled the mouths of lions,* <sup>34</sup> *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.* <sup>35</sup> *Women received back their dead by resurrection; whilst others were tortured and refused to accept release, so that they might obtain a greater resurrection.* <sup>36</sup> *Others faced jeers and flogging, even chains and imprisonment.* <sup>37</sup> *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.* <sup>38</sup> *The world was not worthy of them. They wandered about in deserts and mountains, in caves and holes in the ground.* <sup>39</sup> *Yet although all of these were commended for their faith, they did not receive what was promised.* <sup>40</sup> *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 long 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 and awe-inspiring events of Israel's history. In this way, Hebrews explains that faith has two sides. On the one side it describes the relationship these great people had with their God, and on the other side, their faith enabled them to face the consequences of the 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 (11:32), but then goes on to speak about these two aspects of

faith, speaking as if describing the general experience of faith of all who did God's will in Israel. Firstly, he provides an impressive list of what was done in Israel through the relationship of faith which existed between the great Israelites and 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 many things which we do not readily relate to today, such as victory in war, but we must remember that in past ages, unless a nation was able to defend itself it would soon be eliminated from the map of the world by invasion; something which is still largely true, but from which we are shielded today by our political systems. That is, when they work properly! Despite this, there is a great deal of spiritual value within these verses. They tell us that faith in God our maker lies behind our success in spiritual (if not physical) warfare, the bringing about of justice and taking hold of the promises of God to make them real for everyday life, and also dealing with fear and other spiritual problems. All this is important for us to remember today; faith is 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, Daniel and the lion's den (Daniel 6:10f.) for example, 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 some Christians experienced the wrath of the Roman Empire; 'jeers, flogging ... imprisonment' (all forms of persecution mentioned by Paul in his letters – see Phil 1:13f., 2 Cor 11:23 etc). All this persecution was terrible, but Christ had told his disciples that this was a characteristic of the great men of faith in the past and would be 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. Hebrews says that those who have endured great hardships in the past may be commended for their faith, but they will only receive the benefit of that faith in the present age (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 real resurrection had now become available through Christ, and through faith in Him alone! This was surely worth waiting for through 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 the resurrection from the dead. This alone makes sense of all we experience in this life, and unites us with all the great people of faith who have gone before us, and those yet to come!

## Questions (for use in groups)

1. What great things have been achieved by faith in recent times?
2. What great persecutions have been experienced by people in the world today?
3. Does the prospect of resurrection from the dead give you sufficient faith to trust God for all things? What else does faith mean apart from this?

## Discipleship

The balance between the great things of faith we experience 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; as Hebrews says, they did not for people of Old Testament times! However, reflect on what has happened to you and give thanks to God for the Resurrection which gives hope for the future, whatever has happened.

## 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