

Prayer

Praise You, Jesus our Saviour, for generations of Your people have found in You their hope and joy. Do a fresh work in our midst, we pray; renew Your people, empower them for the work of the Kingdom, and energise them for action. Let us face all things in this life with the hope and joy of Your presence and favour. We ask this in Your Name, AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Missions

Pray this week for people who have given their lives, or some part of their time in other ways, for the specific purpose of mission. Pray God's blessing on all you know who have given a full commitment to the Lord's work in mission, and pray especially for those who openly preach the Gospel in hostile environments, and in countries throughout the world.

Meditation

What a great day it is when the Spirit of God
Moves in the heart of a man or a woman,
And changes everything!

For when the Spirit comes, colours look different,
The Bible is alive with meaning and purpose and love,
The face of one so moved is radiant, observed as full of joy,
Prayer becomes as natural as breathing, in the open and fresh air,
Everyone appears to be full of potential, just waiting to be tapped,
And the world is full of endless opportunity, like a journey just begun!

If you do not know this; make yourself available to God!
If you once knew it, but cannot remember; what went wrong?
If you want to know this, then stop and think, and ask the Saviour!
And if this is what you know, then pray for those who have yet to find it!

Bible Study - Hebrews 12:12-17

¹² Therefore strengthen your feeble hands and your weak knees, ¹³ and 'make straight paths' for your feet, so that what is lame may not be dislocated, but instead be healed. ¹⁴ Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. ¹⁵ See to it that no one misses out on the grace of God; that no spiteful feelings spring up and cause trouble so that many become defiled. ¹⁶ See to it that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless, like Esau, who sold his inheritance for a single meal. ¹⁷ Later, as you know, when he wanted to receive the blessing, he was rejected. He was unable to repent, even though he sought the blessing with tears.

Review

In this latter part of the letter to the Hebrews, the author continues with his advice about the Christian life. After encouraging God's people in their faith (11:1-12:2) and discipline (12:3-11), he offers a collection of sayings as further advice, together with references to the Old Testament (for example in verse 11, the 'straight paths' which echo Isaiah 40:3). The whole passage is generally heartening, but it also contains some strong warnings and firm advice which should not be ignored.

So, in the light of the encouragement given us by the great men and women of faith and compassionate tuition of God our Father, Hebrews calls on Christians to 'strengthen your feeble hands and your weak knees'! There have been times in the life of God's people when these words have been a rallying call, together with the cry 'stand firm' (see 12:7), when God's church has seemed to be under attack. However, remember that throughout the history of the church, Satan has found a way to convince God's people that the church is failing. It has indeed failed

and disappeared in places, but the expansion of God's Kingdom has continually progressed through time, and Satan's complaints and discouragement have not stopped God! All Christians have every reason to take courage and stand tall in the face of the global evidence of what God is doing in His church, even today. I have met too many Western Christians, for example, who bemoan the apparent failure of the church in the West without rejoicing in the extraordinary growth of the Kingdom throughout the world across many other countries. It is as if Satan has succeeded in placing national blinkers on us, yet if we remove them we can stand tall and recover our strength in the full knowledge that God is far from finished with His church which He loves and intends to bless!

Our reading encourages us to 'make straight paths' so that on the journey of faith there may be no injuries, but rather, healing (12:13). What a wonderful picture! The idea of making straight paths comes from the famous prophecies of Isaiah (40:3 – echoed in Jeremiah 31:9) which talk about the Messiah leading His people home in glory. This phrase is also used in Proverbs (4:26) where it speaks of young people learning how to avoid evil and wrongdoing and do what is right. Both passages have in common the idea that a straight path is God's path. A straight path is cleared of stones and rubble which might cause injury, and goes in one direction only. It is the path of salvation, true discipleship and godly service which leads to God's eternal Kingdom.

We are also encouraged to 'strive for peace' and 'holiness', making it clear that these are not options, but requirements (12:14). I have attended conferences and discussions which have debated 'peace' and 'holiness', but I have never been to one which comes anywhere near offering bold instructions about these subjects to God's people! God's Word still speaks to us through such verses with a clarity which cannot be avoided. Peace and holiness are found in Christ alone.

Then, after this advice, comes the powerful but too often forgotten command of Scripture 'See to it that no one misses out on the grace of God.' This is not well understood, and our eyes are easily drawn to the following verses which tell of the understandable importance of avoiding immorality and godlessness (12:16,17). It is, nevertheless, a profoundly insightful comment, because we often assume too much about others. Amongst God's people, we often assume that those who go to church do so because they have some degree of faith, but we do not feel it right to ask questions about this or discuss issues of faith with people openly. It is therefore quite easy for someone to go to church because of an inner need for company, for example, and then become accepted as a 'regular' without anyone talking with them seriously about what they believe, and why. The end result is that some miss out on the grace of God because of ignorance and cultural niceties!

No, says the author of Hebrews; let us be open about our faith in everything. Then our Lord will be able to lead us and encourage us, and the immorality and godlessness of the world will not snatch us away from our own inheritance, as it did for Esau (12:16)!

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. In what ways can the church of the West be strengthened and stand firm?
2. Is it possible to strive for peace with everyone (12:14), or do we sometimes have to accept that not everyone can get along together in the church?
3. What 'spiteful feelings' (12:15) can disrupt the life of the church?

Discipleship

Which pieces of encouragement in this passage challenge you? It could be the part about standing tall and trusting in God (12;13,14). It could be the challenge to put aside sexual immorality (12:16). It could be that you are called to be someone who does not presume that everyone who comes to church on Sundays is in a 'right' place with God. Whatever it is, there is no harm in taking the matter further by leaving to one side any more of these 'discipleship' comments for a week and pursuing this issue in prayer. The Lord will show you what to do.

Final Prayer

May the beauty of Your compassion, O Jesus, ever draw us towards the day when we finally stand before our Maker and call upon His name. And may the anticipation of the glory inspire us each and every day to live a life worthy of our highest call. AMEN