

Prayer

Thank You, Holy and Almighty God, for the day of worship we enjoy today. May we continue to worship you every week in fellowship with others, and privately every day of our lives. May this be our unstinting witness to the faithfulness of our God who loves us and who has laid down His life for us. We worship You, Holy and Almighty God: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Striving for what is right

As God's people, we find ourselves called to strive to do what is right. Such effort can lead into unexpected adventures, finding ourselves caught up in great things, or being dragged into things which are wrong or evil. We will explore these themes during the coming week. Today, please pray that you will always have the courage to strive to do what is right before God.

Meditation

Breathe on us, Holy Spirit; breathe.

May we feel the rush of fresh air which come comes from You,
And breathe more deeply of the things of God today.

May we accept the unconditional peace and love of God,
Which sweeps away all our troubles and fears.

May we rejoice in the challenges of the Spirit's amazing power,
To achieve impossible things within this world.

May we receive the gifts of God which come to us, unconditionally,
The guarantee of our faith and the means of our ministry.

May we be truly comforted by the presence of the Holy Spirit,
And know the powerful healing presence of God Himself.

May we wonder at the mysteries of the Spirit's works of power
And be caught up in things so much greater than ourselves.

Breathe on us, Holy Spirit; breathe.

Bible Study - Hebrews 4:1-5

¹ We should be concerned therefore, whilst the promise of entering into his rest remains, lest any of you think you have failed to find it. ² For the good news has indeed come to us just as it has to them; but the message they heard did them no good, because they did not put together what they heard with their faith. ³ Now, we who have believed are entering into that rest, as He (God) has said, 'As in my anger I swore, "They shall not enter my rest,"' even though His work was completed at the foundation of the world. ⁴ For it says about the seventh day in one place as follows, 'And God rested on the seventh day from all his works;' ⁵ even though, in the passage above it says, 'They shall not enter my rest.'

Review

This passage of Scripture is a conundrum, and you would be forgiven for reading it and thinking 'what does this mean!' To make it more complex, there are different versions of this text in some of the earliest Greek Bibles we possess, and there have been arguments about this text from the time of the early church onwards! What can we say about it in a brief study which will help us understand it?

To begin with, we must understand the line of argument which the writer of Hebrews was putting forward. You may remember from yesterday's passage that the writer was concerned about people who were becoming stubborn and sinful within the church, just as the Old Testament people of God who had been refused entry into the Promised land by God; hence the repeated reference to those 'who will not enter my rest'. Perversely, however, there was another problem in the church alongside that of those who had committed great sins; it was a

problem of unbelief created by people who had probably not sinned at all! These were people who had not really shown any great lack of faith or sin, but because they were the kind of people who had what we might call 'low self image', they did not think highly of themselves. As a consequence, some reckoned that they surely could not be good enough to receive God's great promises, such as His promise of eternal 'rest' (eternal life)! These are the people the writer is talking about when he says in verse 1 'those who think they have failed to find it'.

The problem was that people of low self image and esteem, even in matters of faith, could argue that if all the people who left Egypt were so bad that they could not enter God's rest (the Promised Land), perhaps there were some within the church today who were not good enough to enter into 'the rest' of God's eternal life. After all, even David in Psalm 95:11 (see verse 3 above) could see that some people might not enter the promised 'rest', centuries after the Exodus. Clearly, they argued, God had made that judgement more than once before, even after He had selected a 'People of God', and the nation of Judah. Some were always rejected, and they concluded that He might do so again.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews then began a long and rather complicated argument to try and prove that this was not so. Although I admit it is hard to follow in the Scriptural text, what he says is this. God planned His promised 'rest' at the beginning of creation (which he quotes in verse 4), and this is the intended destiny of all of His people and the same as the eternal life found through Jesus Christ (see previous studies in Hebrews 3). However, he says that those who do not find that rest are sometimes those people who have heard the message of God, but have not taken it to heart; as in verse 2' but the message they heard did them no good, because they did not put together what they heard with their faith'. The root problem, says Hebrews, is whether people applied the Gospel they have heard. Tomorrow, we will find that the writer of Hebrews has more to say about this, so please be aware of what is said here. The repetition of quotes from Psalm 95:11 and Genesis 2:3 at the end of today's passage is the writer's attempt to say that God's intention since the beginning of time stands for all people, even though some have turned away from him in the intervening years.

Given everything we have said, the writer of the letter is trying to address those in the church who have a negative impact upon it. On the surface, they suggest that they are not good enough for the eternal promises of God. In reality, they promote doubt within the church about whether God will honour his promises and give all faithful people the eternal 'rest'. Does this sound familiar? People say this today, and it is just as destructive now as it was then!

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Read through the text again, and discuss in your group whether you can really see what the author is trying to say!
2. To what extent do people shy away from the promises of God in the life of the church today?
3. As a Christian, do you feel that you are heading for God's 'Promised Rest', of eternal life?

Discipleship

Every church I have ever had anything to do with has had amongst its members people who have refused to take communion because they say they are 'not good enough', or who have stood back from some aspects of Christian faith such as the work of the Holy Spirit because they 'don't feel worthy'; and I could go on. We try to be charitable towards all people, but there is a hard question to ask. At what point does the on-going insistence of such attitudes (for such people are rarely willing to change) represent a drain on the proper life of God's people the church? It is a discipleship issue which will not go away!

Final Prayer

Dear Jesus, save me from thinking I am any better than I am, but save me from thinking I am any worse than I am as well! Give me, I pray, a good and realistic assessment of my own faith so that I do not deceive either myself or others, and take my proper place in the life of God's people, the Church. AMEN