

Prayer

Almighty God; You have always been our loving heavenly Father, and Your care extends far beyond our understanding or our reach. Grant us the courage to accept that we do not know all things, and we may explore but never compete with Your creative and loving power. In this light, may we accept that all things come from You, and live as if we truly believe it. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: The Human Spirit

The title 'the human spirit' may seem strange to you as a subject for prayer. This week I ask you to pray, listen to God and seek His revelation. He has made each of us out of the same substances as everything else on earth, but has 'breathed' His Spirit into us to make us living beings. Ask the Lord to reveal the true nature of the spirit He has given you.

Meditation

As we gather for worship today;

- Give us a heart to seek peace with each other;
- Give us a mind to seek truth with each other;
- Give us the strength to work with each other;
- Give us the hope to have confidence in each other;
- Give us such love that longs to forgive one another;
- Give us a soul to truly share with one another;
- Give us compassion to care for one another;
- Give us the emotions to feel for each other;

And so may we honour You this day.

Bible Study - Hebrews 6:1-8

¹ Therefore let us leave the basic teachings about Christ and proceed towards maturity, not repeatedly laying the foundations of repentance from deeds which lead to death, of faith in God, ² baptismal instruction, laying on of hands, resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment, ³ though we will do this, if it is what God wishes. ⁴ It is not possible for those who were once enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, shared in the Holy Spirit, ⁵ and tasted the goodness of the God's word and the powers of the coming age, ⁶ to be brought back to again to repentance after they have fallen away! They are themselves crucifying the Son of God again, and are holding him up to contempt! ⁷ Ground that soaks up rain which has repeatedly fallen on it and produces a crop useful to those for whom it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. ⁸ But if it produces thorns and thistles, it is worthless and close to being cursed. In the end, it will be burned.

Review

If yesterday's passage cautioned God's people about the dangers of not advancing beyond the 'milk' of Christian teaching to the 'solid food' (5:11-14), then this passage jumps much further to warn God's people not to forget the things of God and lose the faith. This would make them 'apostate'; a word which has been used by the church from its earliest times to describe the complete abandonment of faith, and it is what is described here in Hebrews (6:4-6). It says that when faith has been rejected by those who were once fully involved in the Body of Christ and who received its benefits, then there is no realistic way back. The letter is decisive on this, saying that this would like attempting to crucify our Lord again for our personal benefit and choice, having previously rejected His unique death for us on the Cross.

You will not be surprised that there is a great deal of controversy about this passage of Scripture. Many people feel that the teaching of Christ, whilst as absolute as this passage

about the demands of true faith, always offer hope to those who have 'fallen along the way'. They feel that the language of this passage appears to give no hope to those who might wish to 'return to the fold' of Christian fellowship. It is not an easy issue, and has itself created much division within the Church from the earliest of times. I cannot give a complete explanation of this in a short Bible study; but I can briefly explain some things, which I hope this will be helpful.

The first three verses add to what we read previously by telling us what constitutes the basic teaching, or 'milk' of God's Word. The list mentions baptismal teaching, and also highlights repentance, faith, the resurrection, eternal judgement and also 'laying on of hands'. There may be parts of this list which we think of as 'solid food', but Hebrews certainly classes it as 'milk'! The writer states firmly that an established church should not need to repeatedly go over such basics if they really want to grow; 'though we will do this if it is what God wishes' (6:3)! Hebrews then sets down its challenge to all believers. If we have professed faith in Christ, been taught and indeed taken part in the spiritual gifts and activities of God's faithful, the Church, then there are dire consequences if we reject what we once fully accepted and enjoyed (6:4-6). Indeed, there can be no return. The point is reinforced by a simple agricultural example in the last two verses of our passage (6:7,8).

In order to understand what Hebrews is saying, I shall firstly suggest some of those for whom this passage does not apply. It does not apply to the many thousands of people, if not millions, who have experienced Christianity and some degree of faith, but whose lives have led them on a difficult path for countless personal and pastoral reasons, and who have consequently been 'in and out' of the church throughout their lives. Neither does it apply to those who though Christian, discover that they have 'missed the mark' in some quite serious matters, and sincerely seek forgiveness. In my view, this passage is designed to prevent the Church being either thought of or presented as a 'religious option' from which people can freely opt in or out as they wish, or as the circumstances of their lives dictate. It is this attitude towards Christian faith which treats the death of Christ as a personal convenience (6:6).

Hebrews was written against the backdrop of the growth of the early church, and a culture in which people switched and changed religious affiliations freely. The letter warns against this, just as it warns us today that we cannot just do what we want with God's church and still call ourselves Christians. I know that even saying this is controversial, and there is much that I have not said; but I hope this will at least give some understanding to a passage of Scripture which is genuinely difficult to interpret.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Discuss in your group whether you find this passage of Scripture disturbing or difficult; and if so, why?
2. Does God ever turn away a truly repentant sinner?
3. In what ways does the church today present itself like a religious option rather than the truth about God?

Discipleship

You may find yourself in disagreement with me about how to interpret this passage. If so, then spend a little time thinking and praying about this. It has taken me quite a few hours to translate, research and write! That is no justification for my views, but the longer I have spent with this passage, the more I am fascinated by it. It is the sternest of warnings about letting go of the treasure of faith we possess, and yet it wonderfully describes the benefits of faith and the life of God's people the Church! It is a passage which yields much as we reflect upon it.

Final Prayer

Watch, dear Lord, with those who are awake or who weep tonight, and let your angels protect those who sleep. Tend the sick. Refresh the weary. Sustain the dying. Calm the suffering. Pity the distressed. We ask this for Your love's sake. AMEN *(St Augustine of Hippo)*