

## Prayers

### **Thoughts on prayer**

*Consider your own town, city or village. Pray that God will raise up His people where you live and give them an authentic witness to the love of God and His passion for all. Pray that commitments to denominations and church structure will not stand in the way of people finding their unity in the mission and service of their Lord.*

### **A prayer for today**

**Save us O Lord, from the perils of giving in to temptation. Keep us from misunderstanding what You have said to us, from twisting the truth of Your revelation, from gaining satisfaction by leading others astray, or from enjoying the fruits of our own rebellion. Keep our souls and spirits firmly fixed on the example of Christ our Saviour who was faithful to His Father to the end of His life: AMEN**

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## Meditation

The politician organises and controls the world.

But Christ knows the true path of history,  
and sees the sin which ruins human lives.

The economist gives advice on financial affairs.

But Christ knows the true value of everything;  
and He alone reveals a future which He holds.

The entrepreneur takes chances to make wealth.

But Christ is the source of the world's riches;  
and He gives it all away with amazing love.

The celebrity aspires to conquer the world.

But Christ is imprinted on the pages of history;  
and in all the world He is known by the Cross.

The impact of 'great' people we read of each day,

Is set against the only true measure of fame;  
and the supreme saving work of Christ for all.

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## Bible Passage

### **Hebrews 3:7-19**

<sup>7</sup>Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says,

***'If only you would hear His voice today, <sup>8</sup> your hearts might not be stubborn as in the Rebellion, the day of testing in the wilderness, <sup>9</sup>***

**where your ancestors tested me and saw what I did <sup>10</sup> for forty years. For this reason I was angry with that generation, and I said,**

**"Their hearts are always wandering because they do not know my ways."**

**<sup>11</sup> So I swore in fury,**

**"They will never enter my rest."**

<sup>12</sup> So take care, dear friends, that none of you has an evil, unbelieving heart which turns away from the living God. <sup>13</sup> But encourage one another daily, while it is still 'today,' so that none of you may become hard through sin's deceit. <sup>14</sup> For we have a share in Christ, if only our original confidence is held firm to the end. <sup>15</sup> As it is said,

**'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion.'**

<sup>16</sup> Now who was it who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all who left Egypt under Moses' leadership? <sup>17</sup> And who was He angry with for forty years? Was it not those who sinned, whose bodies came to grief in the desert? <sup>18</sup> And to whom did he swear that they would not 'enter his rest', but to those who were disobedient? <sup>19</sup> So, obviously, they were unable to enter because of unbelief.

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## Review

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### SUMMARY

**Hebrews contrasts two ways of looking at God, first the way of Judaism and its dependence on the historic experience of the 'Exodus' and subsequent wandering in the wilderness, and second, the ways of God as evidenced through Christ and the Holy Spirit. Of course, there is no competition!**

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We have already learned from Hebrews about Jesus, the great 'High Priest' (3:1f.), a picture which can help us understand His work as our Saviour. However, the writer of Hebrews is in a battle of hearts and minds, trying to persuade first century Jewish Christians to leave behind the Judaism from which they had come. His task is to give proof from Old Testament scripture that Jews should give up on Judaism completely and instead accept Christian faith in the Son of God.

### ***Hebrews goes deeper into Judaism to argue for Christ***

Here, Hebrews goes further into the core experience of Israelite people and their dependence on Moses (see 3:2,3), taking on the objections of any who might argue that traditional Judaism is the cornerstone of the church. Now the heart of Israelite religion was not just the 'Law', but the circumstances in which it was given, that is, in the 'Exodus', and Israel's wandering in the wilderness and journey to the Promised Land, celebrated in the core Jewish ritual of the

'Passover'. The Exodus was seen by most Jews as a type of 'ideal past' when God was with His people in the tabernacle and they journeyed together towards their promised end.

So as we study this passage, we must keep in mind that Hebrews is speaking to people who held such views and saw the wilderness as central to their relationship with God. Hebrews is brutally clear; what they know of their past is but a faulty picture of a greater future, which is only to be found in Christ, as this passage carefully explains.

### ***A quote from Psalm 95:7-11***

Our passage begins with a classic Hebrew Psalm. This song was used as part of introductory worship in many acts of worship in the Temple, '*Come, let us sing to the Lord, let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!*' (Psalm 95:1f.), so it was well known. Yet halfway through, the song changes and suddenly bewails the sins of God's people when in the wilderness; sins which meant that Israel did not come into her inheritance directly, but had to endure 40 years (meaning one generation's worth) of hardship before coming into the Promised Land. Here is the passage as you find it in the Psalms:

- <sup>7</sup> O that today you would listen to his voice!  
<sup>8</sup> Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah,  
as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,  
<sup>9</sup> when your ancestors tested me,  
and put me to the proof,  
though they had seen my work.  
<sup>10</sup> For forty years I loathed that generation and said,  
"They are a people whose hearts go astray,  
and they do not regard my ways."  
<sup>11</sup> Therefore in my anger I swore,  
"They shall not enter my rest.*

You will notice that our passage (3:7-11) is very similar to the Psalm, though it slightly truncates the sentiments found in the Psalm verses 9 and 10, without losing sight of the general meaning. Check out also that the word '*Meribah*' means '*place of strife*' and the word '*Massah*' means '*place of testing*'; each of these are place names associated with sins in the life of Israel.

### ***Criticisms of Israel - no new thing***

One of the most remarkable things about Israel is that their scriptures are not designed to puff up the life and experience of the nation, but to criticise it so that God's people might learn from past mistakes. We do not always appreciate this feature of the Old Testament, found for example in the critical words and visions of the great prophets, and also quite frequently in sharply disapproving comments found like this one, in the Psalms.

The point here is simple. Hebrews is using this basic feature of scripture to highlight the all-pervasive sinful nature of God's people, as evidenced in the key stories of Exodus through to Numbers. Despite their having been given a way out of their guilt in the atonement rituals (Leviticus 16, in particular), their sin still has consequences, which in this case are that God says they may not enter His '*rest*' (3:11). Every Israelite was aware that sin had remained a problem well after the occupation of the land under Joshua, as the rest of the Old Testament so often explains (as an example, see 2 Kings 17), but they were not so good at remembering the sins they committed whilst on their journey through the desert.

## ***Turning to Christ***

Now turning to God's people and the message of the Gospel, Hebrews uses this illustration to warn Christians against harbouring sin, especially the sin of an '*unbelieving heart*' (3:12). We realise as we read that this, of course, is a criticism by Hebrews of Jewish Christians who would rather trust the law of Moses than liberty in the Holy Spirit.

Clearly, Hebrews is confident in the grace of God in Christ as capable of dealing with all sin, for the letter emphasises not repentance of unbelief, but a more collective way of dealing with this sin. He suggests that a communal sharing of faith bolsters belief and encourages faithfulness to the truths of grace; it is a different approach to what might be called 'on-going' sin and one we do not always notice within scripture. Verses 13 and 14 speak of '*encourage(ing) one another daily ... for we have a share in Christ ... if only our confidence is held firm*' (3:13-15). Now we might not have expected this approach, but it is a clear indication of the confidence of the early Christians in the church as the focus of real living faith. So it is in fellowship with others that Hebrews can say;

*'today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts ...'* (3:15)

### ***Check - who did not enter God's 'rest'?***

In the last paragraph, Hebrews returns to the Israelites and their problem with sin. He emphasises that it was all of Israel who sinned (3:16) despite the incredible benefits of the leadership of Moses (See Exodus 32,33), and points out the anger of God at the rebellion of His people (3:17). This wrath of God is easy to understand because He has been rejected by His people, and it has consequences, just as all sin has consequences. Hebrews spells it out, even though it is there to be found in the Old Testament story. The Israelites who left Egypt all died (except Joshua) before they had the chance to enter the Promised Land; those who sinned died in the wilderness and never entered their heritage, described here enigmatically as God's '*rest*' (18).

We will wait to look further at the meaning of this '*rest*', as it is the subject of the next part of Hebrews. Suffice to say that it here, has the obvious meaning of rest at the end of a journey, and also rest at the end of a day's work, a 'job well done'. The point made by Hebrews here is that if you continue to rebel against God there will always be consequences, and you can't experience the benefits of God and His '*rest*', something that comes from being obedient. We will learn more about this tomorrow!

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## **Application**

### ***Discipleship issues***

#### ***The perils of the unbelieving heart***

This passage speaks of the perils of the unbelieving heart amongst those who one might expect to be believers. Who would have thought that the people of Israel who had just been released from slavery by the awesome power of God would succumb to the sin of disbelief (see Exodus 16f. and 32f.)? Yet we must accept that even those who have attended church all their lives are not protected by this from the devil's pull into this spiritual quagmire.

Unbelief can afflict the least of souls and the greatest of preachers. Those who are frank and who really know the Spirit's power will confess it; I suggest one should be wary of Christian leaders and preachers who will not confess their own struggles, or share how they deal with

them. Here, Hebrews is certain that the sin of unbelief is akin to rebellion against God and this hurts Him grievously. The consequences of sin can be considerable, and remember, such sins are our choices, it is not as if God is sitting there ready to pounce with his stick. We take the consequences of rebellion on ourselves if we turn away from God; and just like the Israelites of old, we may find that we do not come into the inheritance we expect; Hebrews calls it our 'rest', the reward at the conclusion of a journey of faith.

Frankly, I find it hard to imagine that I may not inherit eternal life through unbelief. So, whatever I feel about the church of which I am a member, I must maintain fellowship and rejoice in the way it helps me hold fast to the faith. Equally and more significantly, I must also remember that the only way back to the Father after sin is through Jesus, calling on the grace He has already showed me and asking His pardon for my stupidity and sin. I must be mindful of how embarrassing it is to come before Jesus and ask His pardon when I have already claimed my salvation through His body and blood; should I do so again? I should surely be careful to keep in fellowship and not be ignorant of the wiles of the evil one.

### ***An extraordinary approach to sin!***

The average Christian may well be surprised by this passage. It clearly talks of the the fellowship of believers as a means of fighting sin; it describes Christian worship and encouragement in the community as a basic aid in the fight against unbelief. We may well ask whether this is of any value to Christians since such a method was available to Jews before Christ died.

Yet I do not think that Hebrews is saying that fellowship of itself will deal with the consequences of sin; that, according to the New Testament is the sole work of Christ. It is however indicating that if we want to be serious about sustaining our faith, then the best way to do it is in fellowship with others. Christians together can help one another in the fight against sin in whatever form, and this is something we should not ignore or overlook. A solitary Christian is in a very vulnerable place, and more than that, a Christian who goes to church but refuses to discuss faith or share in true fellowship will find it hard to avoid the perils of sin.

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## ***Questions for groups***

- 1. How does this passage challenge you? How does unbelief manifest itself in the church today, and what is the wisest way to approach its deadly consequences?*
- 2. Does it help us to remember the sins of the Israelites in Old Testament times? How can we best learn from the sins of Israel?*
- 3. Discuss how people can encourage each other in faith. Do your suggestions change as culture changes, or are they independent of cultural change?*

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## **Final Prayer**

**Your love, O Lord, draws me onwards, through the fears and doubts, the trials and temptations of life. Your love draws me to the Cross where, inexplicably, I have nothing left to give You from my mind or my heart. I am empty before You, but You fill me up! All praise be to You, O Lord most High! AMEN**

