

Prayer

Open up our hearts O Lord, and save us from becoming consumed by our own concerns and interests instead of Yours or those of others. Direct us towards a genuine concern for all those who need our love, our help, our care, our fellowship and our friendship; and give us a heart to minister Your love to all who need help, care and friendship. In all this, may we find fulfilment, O Lord; AMEN.

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Education

Pray for Christian teachers, and pray that God will use them to be an influence for good in schools throughout the world, and pray for their protection, both spiritually and physically.

On-going prayers

- *Pray about the serious threat to world peace posed by N. Korea*
- *Lift to the Lord your prayers for this world and the planet's future*
- *Give thanks for the people of this world and their nationalities*

Meditation

I glory in the love You show me, my Saviour.

You give me courage to stand in the struggles of life

When I'm overwhelmed by problems ahead:

You give me a heart to watch for the needs of others

Despite the temptation to live for myself:

You give me strength to stand and be firm in Faith

To apply what I know, and be faithful to You:

You give me love when all my compassion runs dry

The power to forgive, when hurt by offence:

You give me the power to rise above ordinary things

To do what is greater, and aspire to the best:

You give me hope that is real and a vision for the future

In which all things are complete in Your Kingdom:

I glory in the love You show me, my Saviour.

Bible Study - Hebrews 12:1-6

¹ Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great a cloud of witnesses, let us get rid of every burden and every entangled sin, so that we may run with perseverance the race set before us, ² looking to Jesus the foundation and completion of our faith, who for the sake of the joy set before Him endured the cross, distaining its shame, and is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God. ³ Consider how He endured such personal hostility from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart. ⁴ In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your own blood. ⁵ And you have forgotten the encouragement which addresses you as children; 'My child, do

not think disrespectfully of the discipline of the Lord, or lose heart when He reproves you; ⁶ for the Lord instructs those he loves, and disciplines everyone He has accepted as a child.'

Review

Hebrews finally bursts into a great explanation of faith and discipleship, after many chapters of discussion and examination of the work of Jesus Christ. This passage contains a wonderful account of what it means to be a disciple of Christ (12:1-2) followed by an encouraging description of what Jesus has done for us (12:2,3). The passage concludes with a quote from Proverbs 3:11,12 which explains the nature of 'the discipline of the Lord' and which helps us to obtain a proper focus on life's experiences. One thing becomes clear from all this, which is that the ancient wisdom of God's people in the Old Testament can still bless people of New Testament times, and help them understand discipleship and faith in Christ!

The language of the first two verses is colourful and gives a marvellous sense of joy and fervour which comes from the person who first wrote these words. In the midst of difficult times and whilst attempting to encourage people who were struggling to maintain the faith, the writer of Hebrews soars above the problems. The letter encourages us to look not at our own problems, but at the 'great cloud of witnesses' (12:1), which means those Old Testament characters mentioned in the previous chapter who demonstrated faith in God even though they did not have the assurance of the resurrection. Hebrews then adds to this great and ancient testimony of faith and appeals to us to accept the saving work of Christ which will enable us to 'get rid of every burden and every entangled sin' (12:1). This phrase graphically describes the nature of sin which is often experienced by us as some kind of bondage or burden, or as an entanglement from which it feels hard or impossible to escape. Jonah famously experienced this sense of entrapment as he was thrown into the sea for running away from God; 'the waters closed in over me, the deep surrounded me, and weeds were entangled around my head ...' (Jonah 2:5). However, just as Jonah was liberated by the grace of God (Jonah 2:9,10), our liberation is found by 'looking to Jesus' (12:2), who was prepared to go through death on the Cross in order to bring us hope through resurrection.

Hebrews then asks us to dwell on the details of what we know about Jesus. He experienced incredible hostility and personal persecution particularly in His last days, and none of us can say that we have experienced anything similar to this. Yet Jesus suffered these things for us before He knew us personally, and endured them for us as He died on the Cross, and continued to endure them until God's work was finally done and the Resurrection was accomplished. Hebrews appeals to us to accept all this as encouragement, and it is good for us to read it because we take the work of Jesus too much for granted. It is easy for Christians to think of Jesus just as a companion, for example, and forget the cost of what He did for us. Because of this, however, our own lives have been transformed, and we may know not only the salvation of our sins, but also victory over our troubles and suffering!

Hebrews concludes its words of encouragement by quoting from Proverbs 3:11,12; 'My child, do not despise the Lord's discipline or be weary of His reproof, for the Lord reproves the one He loves, as a father the son in whom he delights.' When we read the original of this quote, we notice immediately that although the beginning of the quote is the same in Hebrews as the original, it is not the same towards the end! This may surprise us until we look closely at what Hebrews has done, for the writer has taken the general sense of the second verse in Proverbs and applied it to the Lord, and to us as His children. He has not 'misquoted' the passage, but in the manner of a preacher, he has applied it. The idea is

simple; the Lord will correct us from time to time, sometimes through others and sometimes through Scriptures or even by speaking directly to us, perhaps in our prayers. We should not be distressed by this because it is an expression of God's love that He wishes to correct us; neither should we treat this too lightly as if it was not very important, for what He says to us is always significant.

The writer of Hebrews says this because he is concerned that his earnest encouragement to stand firm in the face of suffering may be treated by some as too stern, and others as insignificant. What he says is important, and we need to hear what he has to say.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. When you think of a 'great cloud of witnesses' to the faith, who comes to mind?
2. Discuss how Jesus' suffering helps us now. How easy is it to accept that someone else's suffering is greater than our own when we suffering?
3. Have you experienced 'the Lord's reproof'? If possible share with your group what this means.

Discipleship

Personal comment:

The power within this text is palpable, and when I read a passage such as this, I find myself doing more than wanting to preach upon it. I feel as if I would like to read it and learn it, because until my soul spends time with it, I am not sure I can take in everything there is to find within it! I feel instinctively that there must be more within the passage, and seek to find a way to discover what it is!

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *If possible, take time to write down a list of the people from the past who have influenced you; they may be Bible characters, or missionaries you have read about, or great leaders for example, or perhaps ordinary Christians who have done things which have changed your life for the better. When you have done this, add Jesus Christ to the list!*
- *Pray for those who need encouragement and the ministry of love and forgiveness, especially those who have lost sight of Jesus.*

Final Prayer

Let me hear Your voice tonight, faithful God and Lord of all. Speak to me so that I may know Your will, whether it be hard or easy, comforting or challenging, exciting or mundane; and let me value each and every word, the instruction You give for Your servant's life. Thank You Lord; AMEN