

Prayer

We thank You, our loving God and Father, for the infinite number of ways in which You are constantly working to make life on our planet enjoyable, adventurous and exciting; not just for Christians, but for everyone. Give us, Your servants, the understanding and sensitivity to take advantage of every feature of life here on earth, and so prove to all our belief that You are a God of love. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Finance

Pray today for the people who are responsible for international finance, people in banks, and also people who govern international financial institutions, such as the IMF.

On-going prayers

- Give thanks to God for the gift of love and those who love you
- Pray for Great Britain and its current political instability
- Lift up to God in prayer the plight of those affected by drought

Meditation

Let the Spirit of liberty free your eager soul

To explore the wisdom and the love of God:

Let the Spirit of renewal inspire your willing heart

To give you the purpose and direction you need:

Let the Spirit of fire descend on the memory of your past

To burn spiritual rubbish and leave pure gold:

Let the Spirit of penitence touch your innermost being

To focus your life on the Lord, not on yourself:

Let the Spirit of compassion fill your considerate hearts

To love the unlovely and offer care to all:

Let the Spirit of unity burst into your consciousness

To remind you anew of your place in Christ's body:

Let the Spirit of prayer consume your waking hours

To refresh spiritual love for your eternal Redeemer:

Let the Spirit of God do His work in you now.

Bible Study - Hebrews 13:7-17

⁷ Remember your leaders, those who spoke God's word to you; reflect on the consequence of their way of life and imitate their faith. ⁸ Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. ⁹ Do not be swept along by all kinds of strange teachings, for it is good for your hearts to be sustained by grace, and not food which does not benefit those who live for it. ¹⁰ We have an altar at which those who officiate in worship have no authority to eat, ¹¹ for when the blood of living creatures is carried into the sanctuary by priests for the sin offering, the bodies of the animals from which this has come are burned outside the camp. ¹² For this reason, Jesus suffered outside the city gate in order to cleanse the people by means of His own blood. ¹³ Let us therefore go to Him

outside the camp and bear the abuse He endured. ¹⁴ For we do not have any lasting city here, but we are looking for a city that is to come. ¹⁵ Through Him, let us always offer to God a sacrifice of praise, that is, the fruit of lips which declare His name. ¹⁶ Do not forget to do good and share fellowship, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

¹⁷ Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they watch over your souls and will have to account for them; in this way they can do their work with joy, and not with sorrow, for that would be of no help to you.

Review

This reading is a little strange, coming as it does almost at the end of the letter to the Hebrews. It begins and ends with advice to Christians about the value of leaders in God's church, and the importance of respecting them for the work they do (13:7,8 and 17). However, in between these verses, the writer of the letter starts by making a point about not following 'strange teaching' (17:9). He uses this to begin a long and rather complex sequence of thoughts that travels through the world of Old Testament sacrifices and back again, to illustrate the sacrifice of Christ for our sins, for which we owe a 'sacrifice of praise' to God (13:15).

Initially, Hebrews offers advice to God's people to follow the example of the leaders who first 'spoke God's Word to you' (13:7). We should remember that in the early days of the church, such leaders were often the great evangelists such as Paul, Barnabas or Apollos, and there was no question about the validity of their life, faith and example. These were people whose lives had shown fruit in the Kingdom of God, and they were an obvious example of faith. Moreover, their example would not fade, for as the letter to the Hebrews puts it, 'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.' This very famous text explains clearly that the heart of our faith does not change because God does not change, and it is logical for Hebrews to continue, 'Do not be swept along by all kinds of strange teachings.' Hebrews has been consistent throughout in opposing any new interpretation of Christ's ministry that is not rooted in the Old Testament. This is the guiding principle for what happens next in Hebrews, as the author wanders back into the Old Testament in order to make his point about the unchanging supremacy of Christ and the praise which is due to Him (13:15,16).

In verse 9, Hebrews talks of the heart as being sustained by 'grace', not food. It is an odd comparison to make, unless we realise that in the old Jewish system of sacrificial worship, animals were killed and some were consequently used for food. Indeed, if Moses' laws were fully enacted, no animal was to be killed for food unless it was first sacrificed to God. A careful reading of the first few chapters of Leviticus shows that whilst some animals were sacrificed and 'burnt whole' in worship of Almighty God, most were sacrificed as 'fellowship' offerings, and the meat was then given back to the people to eat with a portion being kept for the priest. Hebrews is adamant that Christ has replaced this system of worship, and so quite logically, a Christian is now sustained by grace and not food!

Hebrews continues to explain the meaning of all this, and says; 'We have an altar at which those who officiate in worship have no authority to eat.' (13:10), and explains that in the old system giving 'whole burned offerings' to God, the blood was brought into the holy place of the Temple, but the animal was burned 'outside' (either the 'camp' or the 'city gates' of Jerusalem depending on the period of history). He links this thought with the fact that Jesus had died 'outside' the city of Jerusalem when offering His life as a sacrifice for our sins (Heb 2:17, 5:3, 10:12). He then invites the Christian, 'in the Spirit', to go 'outside the camp' (13:13) to see what Christ has done, and the scandal of Christ's sacrifice; and he goes on to explain that because of this scandal, the earthly Jerusalem is no longer the

focus of God's divine interest; 'we are looking for a city that is to come' (13:14). In anticipation of this great new creation of God's, Christian worship of the Lord is a 'sacrifice of praise'; and this is the only place in Scripture where you will find this famous phrase (although it is used in many modern hymns and songs).

Finally, Hebrews calls on God's people to submit to the authority of leaders, as an essential prerequisite for peace and harmony in the church. He identifies something which is painfully true even to this day, which is that if a church leader is unhappy and in sorrow because the people will not accept his or her spiritual authority, then a church will not be blessed (which is the general meaning of 'that would be of no help to you' in verse 17). The issue of godly leadership within the church is far bigger than the points raised here in this passage. However, where good leaders exist, their example should be followed and their authority recognised, for this will enable Christ to do His work in the church. Despite the problems, this should always be our aim.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. What does this passage of Scripture say that reflects issues within the life of the church today?
2. How does the Old Testament help us understand the meaning of worship today?
3. What comes to mind when you use the phrase 'sacrifice of praise' today? Is this an appropriate phrase to use in church today?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

This passage is a little difficult to follow, coming as it does at the end of a long and sometimes complex passage of Scripture. However, the question must be addressed; how are we to put together our belief in an unchanging God and a universal salvation history for all people, and the fact that those who were chosen as God's people (the Jews) are now members of an 'old covenant', and not the new one which gives people hope of salvation. It may seem a small point to us, but unless we can be confident that God is indeed unchangeable, and what He has done on earth is valid and reasonable, it is easy to dismiss God as having acted irrationally in rejecting the Jews in favour of Jesus.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Reflect on your attitude towards church leaders. Who has inspired you, who has not, and why? Bearing in mind that this passage says your church leader has responsibility for your soul before God, try to make an appointment with your leader, to discuss with them how they exercise their pastoral oversight over you.*
- *Pray for the wider church and its leaders, and pray that God's people will be willing to support what is good and reject what is bad with the leadership that it is given.*

Final Prayer

Give me a voice, Lord God, to declare Your works, to preach Your Gospel and defend the faith. May I have the courage to do this for You alone and not give the impression that I do this to gain any heavenly reward, for I long to contribute to the growth of Your Kingdom; AMEN