

## Final Prayer

Your salvation, Lord God, may be beyond our full comprehension, but it is real and true. So we praise You for Your glorious love and for making it real through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ! May we seek to know as much about this as possible; but more than that, may we receive its truth and live by it, throughout our lives: AMEN

## Prayer

We love You, Lord. We love You even when life is hard, for You have already changed us for the better and we trust Your power to do so again and again, according to Your will. If we have sinned, then reveal this to us; and if we have failed to live up to the standards of our faith, then show us how and why this has happened. Then, as we repent, lead us on in faith to love and serve You even more. Receive our prayers, O Lord: AMEN

## Other Prayer Suggestions

### Weekly Theme: Christian service

*In church life, we are sometimes challenged to give our time, our energy or our resources in Christian service. Pray that God will enable His people to respond in faith to such calls.*

### On-going prayers

- Pray for people with menial jobs, that they may be paid properly
- Give thanks for friendship, and pray for all the friends you have
- Pray for childcare services, and the social pressures they face

## Meditation

Do you have to be a gardener to appreciate a garden?  
Do you have to be an astronaut to see the depths of space?  
Do you have to be a parent to understand a child?  
Do you have to be a lover to experience passion?

The Lord has made us each to reach beyond ourselves,  
To feel what others feel, and see what others see.  
Our spirits have this quality of empathy that reaches out  
Beyond our own experience to touch what others feel.

We are made like this because God is like this too;  
His very nature reaches out beyond His goodness,  
To touch our fallen world with undeserved forgiveness,  
To hear our prayers and save us though He has no need to.

Empathically, He longs to draw us to Himself in love,  
For He can always do this, and He will never turn away.

## Bible Study - Joshua 8:1-9

<sup>1</sup> Then the LORD said to Joshua, 'Do not be afraid or be discouraged; take all the fighting men with you, and go up to Ai. Look, I have handed over to you the King of Ai with his people, his city, and his land. <sup>2</sup> Do to Ai and its king as you did to Jericho and its king, except that you may take for yourselves as plunder both its spoil and its livestock. Set an ambush behind the city.' <sup>3</sup> So Joshua and all the warriors set out to attack Ai. Joshua chose thirty thousand warriors and sent them off by night. <sup>4</sup> He gave these commands, 'You must lie in ambush behind the city; do not go very far from it; all of you, keep alert. <sup>5</sup> I and all the rest of people with me will approach the city; when they come out against us, as before, we will flee from them. <sup>6</sup> They will pursue us until we have drawn

*them away from the city; for they will say, "They are fleeing from us, as before." So when we flee from them, <sup>7</sup> you will rise up from the ambush and seize the city; for the LORD your God will give it into your hand. <sup>8</sup> Then, when you have taken the city, set it on fire, as the LORD has commanded. Look! I have commanded you.' <sup>9</sup> So Joshua sent them out, and they went to lie in ambush, between Bethel and Ai, to the west of Ai. Joshua, however, spent that night in the camp.*

## Review

Because of the awful incident of the sin of Achan, the people of Israel learned afresh that they were involved in extraordinary spiritual events that required their complete obedience to Almighty God. Throughout the Old Testament, the Bible records for us a variety of incidents, each of which have spiritual significance and contribute to the story of God's relationship with His people. However, there are occasions when critical things happen, and the Lord needed His people to act together and in total obedience; and this was such a time. When the Israelites attacked and took Jericho, the unity of God's people was unquestioned, and all acted as one and did what God required; after that unity had been shattered by Achan's sin, it had to be re-established so that victory would be assured.

**Spiritual guidance** When we studied the story of Achan's sin, it was very clear that a basic spiritual principle had been ignored and even Joshua needed the Lord to point out to him what had gone wrong. Now, he and all Israel had to focus directly on the guidance they were given if the occupation of the Promised Land was not to fail after only one battle. The instructions given by the Lord were precise, and they indicate clearly the nature of divine guidance. They began with a call to establish a right relationship with God by dismissing fear (8:1), moved on to a promise of victory 'I have handed over the King of Ai ...' (8:1), then the command to fight and apportion the spoils of victory in a way that was different than previously (8:2). After this, Joshua began the process of issuing instructions to the people and to the troops, and he was able to command the people not because they had found their confidence in him, but because they had rediscovered their confidence in God.

**'Do not be afraid'** It remains true for us even now that when we face some great task that we have been given by God, He speaks firstly to issue a word which is part command and part encouragement. The words 'do not be afraid', together with closely related Hebrew phrases (such as 'do not be frightened ...' – Joshua 1:9), occur over 50 times in the Old Testament, and on each occasion, the Lord's people faced a critical moment in their history. The combined instruction 'do not be afraid or be discouraged' occurs three times; here, and in 1 Chron 22:13 and Deut 1:21. In 1 Chronicles, David spoke to his son Solomon to press home the call on his own dynasty to build a Temple for the Living God (in fulfilment of the vision given him in 2 Samuel 7). In Deuteronomy 1, Moses spoke to the people of Israel about taking the Promised Land just prior to their first attempt, which ended in rebellion. In each case, God's call was to the Lord's people to be unafraid to translate the spiritual into the physical. The 'Promised Land' was not to be a spiritual hope, but a physical reality, and the dwelling place of God (as in the Temple) was not to be a purely spiritual belief but an earthly reality. It is therefore right that we should recognise God's voice saying 'do not be afraid or be discouraged' when we are asked to put our faith into practice; to do evangelism openly, to build visible churches, to create real programmes to feed the poor, to challenge governments or to demonstrate God's love by helping our neighbours. Let there be no doubt, all of these things are the spiritual battles of our day, and the reason we know this is because when we start to do them, we are opposed.

**Changing rules!** Under such circumstances, we must listen to what God tells us to do, and the past is not always the best guide! Here in this passage, we are surprised to discover that the city and the people are to be devoted to God (for destruction), but the objects, plunder and other living creatures such as cattle (8:2) could be kept! We would imagine that after Achan's sin of taking such things in the victory over Jericho, the Lord would need to test His people's ability to be obedient to an absolute ban, yet again. But no, the Lord's aim has never been to get people to be obedient by doing the same things over and over again, for this becomes mere faith by habit. The Lord's 'cherem' instruction to Israel (what to hand over to Him for destruction) changed so that He would really know whether they could be obedient, whatever He said.

**Follow the battle plan** Everything else followed on from this. The rest of the reading today contains instructions about the conduct of the battle to come, and the ambush tactic was good military sense; again, a totally different type of command to that given for the destruction of Jericho. Jericho was overcome by a grand religious celebration, but Ai was to be won through military genius. The instructions are interesting and make us wonder what is about to happen, and in the coming readings from Joshua we will discover the truth about God's control of military operations! As is clear in verse 8, the Lord required absolute obedience and commitment, reflected in watchfulness; 'Look, I have commanded you!' (8:8).

## Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. What spiritual 'battles' do we face as God's people today, rather than simply as individual's?
2. In your group, share your experience of needing to be obedient to the Lord's commands, and share the victories you have known.
3. In what ways has the Lord changed His instructions to you in the course of your own life, testing your obedience?

## Discipleship

### Personal comment:

*I am convinced that there are times in the past when I have assumed that the Lord wants the same from me as He has done in the past, but I have not stopped long enough to check out whether His instructions to me have changed. How this has affected my own life and ministry I am not sure, but I do know that God has graciously led me to the place where I can understand His new requirements. He has surprised me and I have not always found it easy to accept different instructions; it is far easier when the 'rules of battle' remain the same! However, the rewards of keeping close to the Lord in order to follow Him more exactly and appreciate the changes, are great!*

### Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Pray for all those who face spiritual battles today, especially when they do not fully understand what they are being asked to do or why. Pray for church leaders who face changing circumstances and need to hear the Lord's new instructions, and any other similar situations He brings to your mind.*
- *Ask yourself how you put your faith into physical, specific action. What do you find hard, and where does 'opposition' come from? If this has not changed for years, ask yourself whether it is time to listen carefully for any fresh guidance.*