

## Prayers

### **Thoughts on prayer**

*Read a passage of Scripture such as one of the healing miracles of Jesus in Matthew 8, and imagine in your mind what it would be like if Jesus was to do such things in our midst today. Then pray that God's people will indeed fulfil their destiny and indeed do such things today. Pray that the church will overcome its bad image today by doing again the work of the Kingdom.*

### **A prayer for today**

**Thank You, Holy and Almighty God, for the worship we enjoy today, free from constraint. May we continue to worship you both in fellowship with others, and privately every day of our lives. May this be our unceasing witness to the faithfulness of our God, who loves us and who has laid down His life for us. We worship You, Holy and Almighty God: AMEN**

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## Meditation

Breathe on us, Holy Spirit; breathe.

May we feel the rush of fresh air from You  
And breathe more deeply of God today.

May we accept the unconditional love of God  
Which sweeps away trouble and fear.

May we rejoice in the Spirit's amazing power  
To achieve the impossible within this world.

May we receive God's gifts, unconditionally,  
The guarantee of faith and means of ministry.

May we be comforted by the presence of Jesus,  
And know the His powerful healing presence.

May we wonder at the mysteries of the Spirit  
And be caught up in His greater work ...

Breathe on us, Holy Spirit; breathe.

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## Bible Passage

### **Hebrews 4:12-16**

<sup>12</sup> For the Word of God is alive and full of energy, sharper than any double-edged sword, penetrating to divide soul from spirit, and joints from marrow,

discerning the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. <sup>13</sup> There is nothing created which is hidden from Him, and all are exposed and laid bare to the eyes of the One to whom we must account.

<sup>14</sup> We therefore have a great High Priest who has passed over to the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold firmly to what we believe. <sup>15</sup> For we do not have a High Priest who is unable to sympathise with our limitations, but we have One who has been tested in every way like ourselves; and yet is without sin. <sup>16</sup> Therefore let us come near to the Throne of Grace with confidence, to receive mercy and find grace to help us in time of need.

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## Review

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### SUMMARY

**From describing Christian faith as something like entering into God's promised 'rest', Hebrews warns that this does not mean our faith is inactive! We are told that God's Word is like a 'doubled edged sword' for for spiritual warfare, and we are told that Jesus responds personally to us and to our circumstances. Thank God for His grace.**

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In our study of Hebrews we have found that the letter addresses Jewish Christians, explaining why they should leave the legalism of Israelite religion and accept the Gospel. It delves into both Old Testament scripture and Jewish history to make the case that God has completed His work in His Son, Jesus, which is why the old rituals based on the historic experience of Israel and the law should be left largely behind.

Such a message may appear clear enough for us to understand, but we may not fully appreciate how forcefully it struck to the heart of the faith of its readers. Here is the Gospel in the raw; put politely, but stated with absolute conviction and with no 'wriggle room' for its key features. Christ, and Christ alone leads the believer to God, and Christian worship is only a reflection of Old Testament practice in so far as it illustrates the glory and honour due to Christ.

### ***A sudden shift in the letter?***

As we read Hebrews 4:12-16, it might be easy to forget this key feature of Hebrews. The dramatic opening describing the '*Word of God*' as like a '*double edged sword ...*' discerning the '*thoughts and attitudes of the heart*' (4:12) is used by most preachers as a pastoral and practical call to faith, and the passage is well known. Then the point which follows, about Jesus being like a great High Priest who identifies with each person of faith who responds to the grace of God (4:14-16) reinforces the idea of God's love and concern for all those who ask for His mercy; '*therefore let us come near to the Throne of Grace with confidence ...*' (4:16).

We could launch into trying to understand this passage and completely ignore all that has gone before in the letter. However, we will not do it justice without remembering all we have learned so far. Hebrews is fundamentally about explaining on the one hand how Christian faith is inseparable from its Jewish roots, but on the other hand how it leaves behind the religion of Judaism.

## **Active service - a big contrast to 'rest'!**

Remember, Hebrews has just been describing the Gospel as like coming into God's 'rest' (4:1-11). But in case anyone thinks this means faith is a passive or internal life choice, Hebrews replies with a resounding no! '*The Word of God is alive and full of energy ...*' (4:12)! In any explanation of this great passage, we must start here.

The picture of a double edged sword is powerful, as is the work it does, '*penetrating to divide soul from spirit ...*' (4:12). The picture is indeed that of someone on active duty doing spiritual battle in heavenly places. Certainly, the commonest interpretation of this passage is its encouragement to the believer to use Scriptures within spiritual warfare. God's Word can answer the tempting lies of Satan, as it does when Jesus uses scriptural quotes for this exact purpose during His temptations in the wilderness (Matt 4:1-11).

## **Dividing soul from spirit and discerning thoughts and attitudes ...**

However there is more, and we should pay attention to the rest of this great verse. The difference between soul and spirit exploited by the sword of God's Word is this. 'Soul' means everything a living created being is supposed to be, full of every complex thought, deed and emotion, from sin to the desire to love God and others, and from good deeds to evil or unfinished works. However, 'Spirit' refers to the divine 'breath' within us which makes us into a self conscious, cognisant person with the hope of finding God and responding to Him.

So you see that the Word of God cuts the difference between our own thoughts, attitudes and feelings (or our 'soul'), and those of God (His 'breathing' of our 'spirit', prompting us within). This is not difficult theology. How else do we find out what is right and wrong other than to check out God's Word? Christian history is littered with examples of people who have failed to submit their thoughts and feelings to God and consequently made bad judgements. Scripture is the difference, and the 'double edged sword' will always lay people open to the truth. As Hebrews says '*there is nothing created which is hidden from Him ...*', yet how we love to think so when we defend our personal opinions!

## **Jesus - the great High Priest - the comforter**

In verses 14 to 16, two important things come to mind. First, this all follows on from what we have read so far in Hebrews about the work of God the Son; '*He had to become like His brothers and sisters in every respect, so that He might be a ... High Priest in the service of God ... consider Jesus, the apostle and High Priest of our confession ...*' (Hebrews 2:17, 3:1).

Second, the language of our passage is like that of the great discourses of John's Gospel, in which Jesus appeals to the disciples to understand that when He has gone, He will still be present in the Holy Spirit; '*the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all I have said ...*' (John 14:25-26). This connects well with the first half of our passage about the Spirit and the Word of God ...

The passage is clear enough. We already know that Hebrews calls Jesus our great High Priest, which means we have no need to honour the High Priestly family ruling religious Judaism in Jerusalem (largely on behalf of the Romans). Instead, we have direct access to God through our risen Saviour Jesus (4:14)

## **A High Priest who sympathises with us ...**

As well as the verses about God's Word as a double edged sword (14:12-14), verses 15 and 16 are very well known. In contrast to the powerfully active vision of the sword, these verses

speak powerfully of the loving action of God through Jesus, who will help us in our need, and who knows us enough to understand us and empathise with our suffering. In any discussion of pastoral work and care within the life of the church, these verses are crucial.

They encourage us to have confidence that instead of trusting human resources for help, through Christ we have access to all the assets of heaven! So when we have a need, instead of placing our hopes on the visit of a pastor, or when we have doubts looking to the writings of great authors or archbishops, we should access the heavenly help that trumps it all! '*We do not have a High Priest who is unable to sympathise with us in our limitations ...*' (4:15) says Hebrews, slightly tongue in cheek because the Jewish High Priests were known to be out of touch with ordinary people. Hebrews is trying to make us laugh at the limitations of human 'help'! For whatever the need or crisis, and our desire for all the human help we can get, the only help that transforms life is the help we find in '*One who has been tested in every way like ourselves, yet is without sin!*' (4:15). His spirit within us changes the soul.

### ***A glorious invitation***

It is no surprise therefore that Hebrews invites us to take advantage of the benefits of Christ's High Priestly service. His appeal is to Jewish Christians whose experience of regular worship is that of Temple and synagogue where God is found in sacrificial ritual and scriptural legalism. How incredibly liberating to be told; '*come near to the Throne of Grace with confidence, to receive mercy and find grace to help ... in time of need*' (4:16).

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## **Going Deeper**

### ***Jews and Gentiles in the early church***

Hebrews was written in the early years of the Christians church; if we research in Acts we find that the Holy Spirit had to demonstrate very clearly that the Gospel was for Gentiles as well as Jews (e.g. see Acts 10 and 15). Paul agonises over the issue (see Acts 15,18), for many early Christians were Jews, who naturally continued to worship God as they had always done.

Over time, tensions grew between Christians of Gentile and Jewish background, but no one thought of separating the church to account for such divisions! In his letters, Paul declares forthrightly that the Gospel is free for all, '*Jew or Gentile*' (Galatians 3:28). His is a mission to Gentiles, so he ensures that the rituals of Judaism do not creep into the church. We should not be surprised to find that a different letter, Hebrews, approaches this matter differently. Paul's letters build up the Gentile church and urge Jews to accept the Gospel, Hebrews explains Jesus and the Gospel from a distinctly Jewish perspective. From then until now, we have benefitted from its wisdom and the way it connects the Gospel to its Old Testament roots.

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## **Application**

### ***Discipleship issues***

#### ***Submitting our thoughts and feelings to God***

The picture of God's Word as a sharp sword used in spiritual warfare is stunning. Frankly, people are either incredibly moved and blessed by this as they begin to understand how they can handle life's difficulties, or they can be very threatened. The idea that God through His

Word can understand the very thoughts and feelings of our hearts is deeply disturbing to some. Those who have been raised in a society in which privacy is an absolute may well feel threatened, and a God with this power is to be feared.

Yet the greatest liberation of the human soul comes when we allow God's Spirit the freedom to breathe in our souls to expose right from wrong, and deal a deathly blow to the evils lurking within our souls. Certainly, if we want to engage in spiritual warfare, then we must be ready to allow God to do this work within us, and unfortunately, anything less is hypocrisy. I have seen many who want to engage with spiritual warfare, but they are unwilling to allow the Spirit free reign within their own souls. Of course, this will not work, and those who take this road will be unsatisfied.

### ***Using God's provision to help us in our failing ...***

The wonderful words which follow concerning Jesus as our High Priest say something very similar. How often do we look for earthly help when it is heavenly help we need. Yes, there are a thousand circumstances where we need physical help; we all may need practical assistance with anything from car tyre blow outs to diseases or natural accidents. However, our souls are often not satisfied with physical help alone. Inside, most people long for a touch of empathy and spiritual understanding, something that we can sometimes get from others, but we can also get from God, for He is person on whom we can depend.

This passage promises us that the intention of God is always to help and to save. He has the power to read our minds and do all manner of things, but he prefers to allow us to choose His love and accept the offer of His help. His is the language of relationship choice not imposition and domination. This is the reason why we can '*draw near with confidence*' (4:16).

### ***Questions for groups***

- 1. What is your understanding of the difference between the terms 'soul' and 'spirit'. Has this study helped or hindered your understanding of his?*
- 2. There is a great deal within this passage of Scripture. In your group, discuss those parts of it which you feel are significant.*
- 3. Do you believe you have the 'full assurance' of your faith? What does this mean to you?*

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## **Final Prayer**

**Dear Jesus, save me from thinking I am any better than I am, but save me from thinking I am any worse than I am as well! Give me, I pray, a good and realistic assessment of my own faith so that I do not deceive either myself or others, and take my proper place in the life of God's people, the Church. AMEN**