

- Find out where the nearest Jewish synagogue is, and see if it is possible for you or a group from your church to visit. There are many different Jewish synagogues with different theologies and spiritual life, so it is not always easy to gain access.
- Pray to the Lord and ask His forgiveness for the crimes of Christians in the past, who have engaged in war and bloodshed in the name of Christ. Pray that Christian nations will give a better example today.

Final Prayer

Heavenly Father, place into my heart the very truth of Your Gospel. May it guide my every thought and inspire my every deed. May I therefore make choices that are centred around Your will, and be drawn by the power of Your love into the eternal purposes of God. AMEN

Prayer

Break the powers of evil from over us,
 Lord God who has made all heaven and earth:
 Shine a light on our lives that is brighter than the sun,
 Lord Jesus, who has lived on earth and has died for us all;
 Liberate us from ourselves, from our sins and our wickedness,
 Holy Spirit, wind of God, divine comforter of souls and friend of sinners.
 Holy Father, become real in our live this day: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Weapons of War

Pray for young people brought up in a world where guns are regarded as a part of life, and necessary for self protection. Pray that they may come to know the peace of Christ.

On-going prayers

- Pray for Thailand as its people continue to seek democracy
- Pray for the strained relationships between India and Pakistan
- Give thanks for your home and all that God has given you

Meditation

What is true worship? To search for God,
 Or to yield in praise to Christ, who is our Saviour?

To satisfy some personal spiritual needs,
 Or to let Him deal with us according to His will?

To be carried away by the music we like,
 Or to listen, and find the music of a heavenly choir?

To be told what to do and when we can do it,
 Or to be invited to join in with the things of God?

To hear a preacher give a view on life and faith,
 Or to hear the Word of God preached with conviction?

To bring some change for the offertory plate,
 Or to give all we have to the one who we love?

To listen to some prayers said on our behalf,
 Or to join with the prayers of all the servants of Christ?

What is true worship? A personal quest?
 It is a yielding of ourselves to the Lord who is our God.

Bible Study - Matthew 23:34-39

³⁴ 'Therefore I send to you prophets, sages, and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town, ³⁵ so that all the righteous bloodshed on earth may come upon you, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of

Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. ³⁶ Amen, I tell you, all this will come upon this generation.

³⁷ 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those who are sent to you! How often have I longed to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you refused! ³⁸ Look, your house is left to you, desolate. ³⁹ For I tell you, you will not see me again until you choose to say, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord."'

Review

In chapter 23, Jesus began by denouncing the Pharisees (23:1f.), but as He continued, there was a change in his approach and manner. Jesus turned to the crowds and told them that they were as culpable for the sins of Israel as their leaders, the Pharisees and the chief priests, and Jesus prophesied their fickle change of heart. The crowd who had once shouted 'Hosanna' and welcomed Him to Jerusalem might do so again one day in glory, but before then, they would call for His death (27:23).

Yet we should not think of Jesus as willing to condemn anyone out of hand. He called judgement upon those who had rejected their God by choosing their own way; and He condemned the Pharisees and their scribes because of hypocrisy, irreligion and injustice. The crowd therefore could no longer sit on the fence; their simple choice was between following Jesus or following the Pharisees.

The sins of 'this generation' Boldly, Jesus spoke prophetically about what His own people would do, declaring that they too would 'kill and crucify, and ... flog in your synagogues ...' (23:34). In this way Jesus linked the crowds with the same sins as the tenants in the vineyard (21:33-44), and also fulfil what Jesus said at the beginning of His teaching, that the disciples would be persecuted (5:11,12).

Now, Jesus said that God's messengers would be prophets, sages and scribes. This reads like a list of spiritual leadership gifts. They are not the same as the 'charismatic' gifts Paul lists in Romans 12 or 1 Corinthians 12, but more similar to those in Ephesians 4:11. We know about 'prophets' in the Church, but what about sages and scribes? The term 'sage' refers to the gift of wisdom; and the term 'scribe', which is not as negative as we might think, means 'scholar' (e.g. see Jesus' teaching in Matt 13:52 'every scribe trained in the Kingdom ...'). Jesus therefore said that God would send prophets, wise men and scholars would do the work of the Kingdom, who would be opposed and slaughtered, and this proved true in the life of the early church.

Early martyrs of the church were Stephen (7:60) and James (Acts 12:2), and church tradition indicates the crucifixion of others such as Peter (believed to have been crucified upside down). However, this only continued the long history of murder in the Old Testament (see Abel, Gen 4:8, and Zechariah, 2 Chron. 24:21,22) which had become endemic even amongst the people of Israel.

Jesus' last word to the crowds Jesus sounded upset as He called out on Jerusalem in anguish (23:37f.), expressing the Father's desire to call His children back. Centuries before, the prophet Hosea wrote 'when Israel was a child I loved him ... the more I called them, they more they went from me.' (Hosea 1:1-3), expressing the tragic theme of the rejection of God by His people. Jesus' anguish is shown in His use of the enigmatic picture of a mother hen with chicks (see also Ps 17:8, 91:4, Is 31:5 etc.), also reminding us of the famous description of Israel by Moses; 'As an eagle stirs up its nest and hovers over its young, as it spreads its wings ... and bears them aloft.' (Deut. 32:11). Jesus appears to show a degree of affection for Jerusalem in these verses, given that He knew He was coming to the city to die. However, as with most Jews of His day, Jerusalem represented

the heart of the nation of Israel, being the focus of its worship, pilgrimage and personal devotion.

The terrible point of His prophecy, however, was to speak about the coming destruction of the Temple, a building that the Herods had never completely finished; He said, 'Look, your house is left to you, desolate.' (23:38). 'House' could mean 'house of Israel', referring to the loss of status of Israel as God's people at the coming of the church; and this could also mean the Temple, which was destroyed by the Romans in AD70. The prophecy could also refer to the removal of God's 'Shekinah' glory from the Temple (the word 'desolate' means 'empty'). The 'Shekinah' glory was a way of talking about God's presence, and refers to God's 'dwelling' in glory in the world. When Jesus died, the 'veil of the Temple' was torn, and this implies that God had left His dwelling place in the Temple. The Church would soon discover that He was present in the world not in buildings but within His people.

The final choice The final verse of our passage (23:39) has been much debated, because of natural concern about how and when the people of Israel might be able to return to the Lord their God. It has often been thought that Jesus was referring to the Last Judgement, because Matthew's Gospel is moving towards a discussion of this theme, and Jesus' second coming appears to be referred to when He says 'you will not see me again until you choose to say "blessed in He who comes in the name of the Lord"' (23:39).

However, you may notice that your own Bible has 'you will not see me again until you say ...' and I have added at the end of this phrase 'until you choose to say ...'. This is because the Greek text clearly indicates an 'indefinite possibility'; so the door is always open for anyone, and any Jew can chose to say 'blessed in He who comes in the name of the Lord', and by so doing, accept Jesus as Lord and Messiah. For this reason, I believe that in this saying (23:39) Jesus gave a final plea for His people to return to Him. If Jesus' forthcoming death and resurrection was a defining point in the rejection of the Messiah by the Jews, the door has always remained open for them to accept Him as Messiah, and see him 'again'.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. How does God dwell in this world? What does it mean today to speak about God's Shekinah glory?
2. Read through the passage again and try to get a 'feel' for Jesus' emotions in this passage. What would you say He felt?
3. Jesus spoke about gifts of prophecy, wisdom and scholarship. How do these gifts relate to the life of the church today?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

Many Christians rarely come across Jews, or have any idea as to how they might feel about any anti-Semitic feelings that may be generated by this passage of scripture. It is easy therefore, for us to ignore passages such as this which because of their anti-Pharisaic message, have been used to justify anti-Semitism for centuries. Courts have even tried Jews on the charge of 'theocide' (killing of God)! Clearly, Jesus felt deeply about what happened to His own people. There is and always has been a special relationship between Jews and Christians, and perhaps we should seek, whilst being faithful to our discipleship, to express this as positively as possible.

Ideas for discipleship programme