

- *Pray and ask the Lord to help you come to terms with what the 'Parousia' means; the 'End', when the world as we know it comes to its conclusion and Christ begins His reign on earth. Pray, and ask the Lord for a focus on this subject. You may even find it in this text.*
- *Talk wherever possible to people around you about the end of all things. Today, it is even something you can talk about in a pub! Take the risk and find out what happens.*

## Final Prayer

We bless You, Jesus Christ our Saviour and Lord. Come again and make all things good, cure our sicknesses and heal our strife; and then unite Your people so that we may live with You in glory. Thank You, Jesus, for this great vision of Your future. AMEN

## Prayer

Your strength and energy, Lord God, breaks into my life each day. It provides me with courage to face new things, love to embrace all kinds of people, hope to believe in what I do and pursue it, patience to handle difficult circumstances, and the desire to complete my days' work well. I praise You for Your strength and energy, which invigorates my life. Thank You, Lord God. AMEN

## Other Prayer Suggestions

### Weekly Theme: The Seasons

*Thank God for the changing seasons which are part of the way that life is managed and for the familiar patterns of time we use such as months, weeks, days, hours and minutes.*

### On-going prayers

- *Pray for those who have lost their jobs because of the recession*
- *Give thanks to the Lord for the health you enjoy*
- *Pray for those charged with the care of children in need*

## Meditation

Give me those gifts and graces I need, Lord Jesus Christ,  
To be a faithful disciple of Yours. Help me:

- To accept the limits of the life you have given me;
- To refrain from jealousy about the gifts of others;
- To hold my tongue when I might hurt others;
- To smile when I mean it, and not fake it or avoid it;
- To question my motives first, before those of others;
- To conquer my anger before it rises and conquers me;
- To give my full attention to others, so they know they are heard;
- To strive to be a peacemaker, a person of mercy and love,

Grant me this prayer so that I may become more like You;  
You have called me to be Your disciple, My Lord, and my God.

## Bible Study - Matthew 24:15-28

<sup>15</sup> *'So when you see "the abomination of desolation" standing in the holy place, as spoken of by the prophet Daniel, let the reader understand this. <sup>16</sup> After that, those in Judea must escape to the mountains. <sup>17</sup> Anyone on the housetop must not go down to get things in the house; <sup>18</sup> no-one in the field must turn back to get a coat. <sup>19</sup> In those days, how terrible it will be for pregnant women and nursing mothers! <sup>20</sup> Pray that your getaway will not be in winter or on a Sabbath. <sup>21</sup> For then there will be great distress unequalled since the beginning of the world until now, and never equalled again. <sup>22</sup> If those days had not been shortened, no one would be saved; but for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short.*

<sup>23</sup> If anyone then says to you, "Look! Here is the Messiah!" or "There he is!" do not believe it. <sup>24</sup> For false "Christs" and prophets will appear and perform great signs and wonders, with the potential to deceive even the elect. <sup>25</sup> Take note, I have already warned you. <sup>26</sup> So then, if they say to you, "Look! He is in the wilderness," do not go there. If they say, "Look! He is in the inner rooms," do not believe it.

<sup>27</sup> For the coming of the Son of Man will be like lightning flashing from east to west. <sup>28</sup> Wherever there is a dead body, the vultures will gather.'

## Review

Jesus continued His prophecy about the End, using a quote from the Old Testament, and then developed this with startling descriptions of what will happen when He comes again in glory, the event that we call the 'Parousia' (24:16-22). Yet again, Jesus talked about those who would claim to be the Messiah and implored the disciples not to pay them any attention (24:23-26). Finally, he described the speed and clarity of His return (24:27). For one who was well aware that He was about to be handed over to the Roman authorities to be killed, it was an astounding piece of teaching showing the sheer optimism of One who could only speak like this because He knew that His Heavenly Father was in command of the future as well as the present.

**The abomination of desolation in the Temple** This desecration of the Temple was something too awful for Jewish people to contemplate. It referred to the practice of placing images of foreign gods in the 'holy of holies' within the Temple by their own Kings to secure 'foreign policy goals' (e.g. see King Manasseh in 2 Chronicles 33:15). Such actions were like treaty agreements saying 'I will honour your gods and you will honour mine'. Such practices, particularly of Manasseh, were regarded as the reason why the Kingdom of Judah had failed when it was finally overrun by the Babylonians in 586BC.

In addition to this history, Jesus identified His quote from scripture as coming from Daniel (24:15 – note that the other Gospel writers do not do this). In his visions, Daniel reported an 'abomination of desolation' being set up in the Temple at Jerusalem three times (9:27, 11:31, 12:11). The Jews believed that Daniel's prophecy was fulfilled in 167BC, when the ruler Antiochus Epiphanes IV placed an image of the Olympian god Zeus in the Temple, thus accepting Greek culture. This event sparked the Maccabean uprising which led to fierce fighting and thousands of deaths.

Many have tried to identify this 'abomination of desolation' with various past events, but Jesus' words 'let the reader understand' have always sounded a note of caution to all who think they know the mind of God about the last time this will happen, at the Parousia. Of course, now that the Temple does not exist except in the hearts of God's people, the Church, we should be on the watch for false idols set up in people's hearts and in the church. It is a sobering thought.

**Terrible things; persecution and disaster** Verses 16 to 22 are difficult to read. They describe the terror of the Parousia in terms of cataclysmic events, with people fleeing in panic (24:16) with no way back (v17,18) even for the essentials of life. It tells of the tragedy of those who care for children and babies (24:19); the obstructions of petty legalism which prevent get-away (24:20, referring to the hindrance of Sabbath rules). Jesus did not explain these terrible events, but we understand the picture.

Jesus' first instruction, though, was that at the Parousia, God's people should disperse and flee from the apparent safety of what is familiar (24:16). This may be controversial, but it is Jesus' way of telling His faithful to get away from the false influence of the abominations set up in their midst. However, the mercy of God is that He will not allow the horror of this

distress to persist. Jesus say that if unchecked, false worship in the church might compromise the salvation of 'the elect' (24:22); and this is why God will 'cut short the time'.

**False Messiah's and false prophets** In the previous passage (Matt 24:9-14), Jesus warned about the teachings of false prophets, but in our passage today, He emphasised the problem of false 'Christs'. Jesus said that there would be those who deceived people by either pretending to be Him, or who told people that the Messiah had come at some place or time (24:25,26) when this was simply not true (24:26). There is some evidence that the early church did indeed have trouble with such claims (Acts 5:36), and in the first century after Jesus' death there was a great deal of speculation about this as there is even to this day. Jesus' words in Matthew's Gospel are designed to stop unnecessary speculation causing distress and misguidance amongst God's people, and we should heed them.

False prophets and teaching about the Parousia are rife today, but most would quickly dismiss people who say 'I am the Messiah'; though some do try! Amongst these false prophets, Jesus said there will be those able to perform great 'signs and wonders' (24:24). Now, many today believe the ministry of 'signs and wonders' to be a powerful evangelistic tool, so how can we know what is right and what may be deceptive? Jesus invite us to be cautious; so as a general rule, all true signs and wonders which are indeed God's work will point towards the one great 'sign and wonder', which is Christ's death and resurrection by which we are all saved. All others should be regarded with suspicion.

One thing is clear from what Jesus said about the Parousia; it will be as swift as lightning (24:27) and as obvious as a dead body to vultures (24:28)! These graphic images should quickly disillusion us about protracted arguments over the Parousia and its timing. All we need to know is that it will happen, and if we are debating it, discussing it, or wandering around trying to find where it has happened, then we have missed the point and it has surely not yet happened! In this case, we getting ourselves ready, not looking for it!

## Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Does this passage of scripture cause you to feel concerned? Do you ever imagine what will happen to you at the Parousia?
2. Examine verse 22. What do understand by 'the elect', and discuss why God might have to cut short 'those days'?
3. Are there false Messiah's today; who we can identify and expose? How do they present themselves?

## Discipleship

### Personal comment:

*It is a tough call for Christians to attempt to make sure that idolatry does not find a home within their churches. Further, it is one thing to keep an eye on your own church, but I reckon that what Jesus talks about in this passage of scripture is to do with the Church on a far bigger scale than merely local. Our challenge therefore is to make it our business to know what is happening within the denominations and in wider church circles. Whether we can spot signs of the Parousia will always be something of a mystery until what we read about here becomes obviously true. So far it has not, and we wait for it, whilst conscious that many of the 'signs' are quite close to our experiences. We should be careful.*

### Ideas for discipleship programme