

- *Pray and bring before God your own attitude towards scripture; whether you want it to speak to you without any effort, or whether you are ready to put effort into discovering what God says.*

## Final Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus, open up our lives to the possibilities of Your grace. May we value the disciplines of our faith and also the freedom of Your Spirit, both of which are essential to the life of faith we seek to live. Lead us graciously, and show us how to live graciously, we ask You; AMEN

## Prayer

All praise to You, Lord Jesus. From when I awoke and through every moment of this day, You have been with me. Take away from me the stubborn self-centredness that fails to appreciate Your presence at those moments when I most seriously need to hear Your voice and take Your advice. Hear my prayer, and guide me through this day, Lord Jesus, AMEN

## Other Prayer Suggestions

### Weekly Theme: The Seasons

*The seasons contain Christian festivals, and they are tied to the seasons so that we might think of them as God's gift. Pray about the way in which Christmas is celebrated today.*

### On-going prayers

- *Pray for all who will experience hardship this Christmas time*
- *Pray for those who have lost their jobs because of the recession*
- *Give thanks to the Lord for the health you enjoy*

## Meditation

The glory of Your presence Lord Jesus, is like

the unsurpassed perfection of a well loved, homely meal;  
 the sense of being at one with the world in a walk across hills;  
 the thrill that flows through the caring touch of a lover's hand;  
 the pleasure of beginning a task you have always wanted to do;  
 the delight of completing a project that has required your all;  
 the joy, energy and promise of a clear and fresh spring day;  
 the enjoyment of a precious conversation with a dear friend;

The glory of Your awesome presence, Lord Jesus,  
 Never fails to inspire, to strengthen, to encourage,  
 And to motivate Your people to look forward with joy  
 To the wonders of Your Kingdom, which await us.

## Bible Study - Matthew 24:29-36

<sup>29</sup> *Immediately after the distress of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of heaven will be shaken. <sup>30</sup> Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the families of the land will mourn, and they will see "the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven" with power and great glory. <sup>31</sup> And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.*

<sup>32</sup> *Now, learn this lesson from the fig tree: as soon as its branch becomes tender and sprouts leaves, you know that summer is near. <sup>33</sup> In the same way, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. <sup>34</sup> Amen I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have happened. <sup>35</sup> Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass*

away,<sup>36</sup> but about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.'

## Review

This passage of scripture touches the heart of some of the most hotly disputed issues concerning the coming of Christ in Glory; the Parousia. The problem is encapsulated in verse 34, which says 'this generation will not pass away until these things have happened.' Some say that Jesus was wrong, because of the obvious facts that the Parousia did not occur before the generation who saw Jesus died; but surely there is another explanation? Unfortunately, this passage is not easy to understand or interpret, and however simple it may seem on first reading, it is highly contentious. I have read a considerable number of commentaries on this passage and there is virtually no agreement amongst anyone on what Jesus was really saying about the Parousia.

We will study the details of these verses and see whether a more straightforward answer to this puzzle is forthcoming. Some scholars try hard to see if the text of the New Testament might mean something other than the plain meaning of the text as found in most Bibles, but this is futile. To begin with, in verses 29 to 31, Jesus prophesied what would happen around the time of His 'coming on the clouds'. This is an impressive picture of the Parousia and it has stirred the hearts and minds of generations of Christians; it has also inspired literature and art for two thousand years. He then went on to speak more fully about the 'signs' of His coming, and we will find out that the signs are different from the description of what will happen.

**The Day of the Lord** Four passages of Old Testament prophecy lie behind 24:29,30: each of them referring to the 'Day of the Lord'. The first is Isaiah 13:10 'for the stars of the heavens ... will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light'. This is Isaiah's prophecy that God's judgement would come in 'the Day of the Lord' (Is 13:6) upon Israel's oppressor Babylon. This, of course happened when Babylon was overthrown by Persia (as described in the book of Daniel).

The second passage is from Joel 2:10 'The earth quakes ... the heavens tremble. The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining'. This is another prophecy about the 'Day of the Lord' (1:15), described here as like a locust plague destroying the land, just like the people's sins. Other similar passages to these are found in Isaiah 34:4, Ezekiel 32:7, Joel 4:15, Amos 8:9, Haggai 2:6,21, and they all speak of the coming 'Day of the Lord' when God would act in judgment against sin. God has clearly worked throughout history to do this in various ways, principally through Jesus. However, here in this passage Jesus used this phrase to refer to God's final Parousia.

**Heavenly signs and wonders** The next passage comes from Zechariah 12:10-14; 'when they look on the one whom they pierced, they will mourn, and weep bitterly over Jerusalem. On that day the mourning will be great ... each family by itself ... all the families that are left'. This is a complex passage with multiple connections to Matthew's Gospel. In verse 30 of our passage, Matthew speaks about the 'families of the land', and 'mourning' which link with Zechariah's prophecy. The mourning of Israel at the Parousia may well therefore suggest the repentance of Israel at Jesus' eventual return; something very important to Jesus, given His concern for His own people despite their rejection (e.g. see 23:37ff).

The fourth prophecy comes from Daniel 7:13 'I saw one like son of man coming with the clouds of heaven'. Throughout Matthew's Gospel, Jesus had been called the 'Son of Man' (e.g. Matt 10:23) with authority to establish a Kingdom 'which shall not be destroyed' (Dan 7:14). He gave His life to this ministry, and as it was drawing to an end; so Jesus described His return using this picture from Daniel, describing His appearing 'in heaven' (24:30), and His authority to gather the people of God. Jesus prophecy is a masterpiece of

prophetic interpretation, bringing together the Word of God spoken in ancient times and making sense of it in terms of God's revealed plan through Jesus.

**The Fig Tree** But how do we handle this amazing vision, and in particular, how do we deal with the fact that Jesus talked about it as happening within the lifetime of the people to whom He spoke (24:34)? The clues lie in what Jesus said next. Having talked about what would happen at the Parousia, Jesus turned to speak about the signs evident within the world that it would indeed happen one day.

To illustrate this, Jesus returned to the illustration of the fig tree, which we previously read about in Matthew 21:18-22. The fig tree was one of few trees that lost its leaves in winter, and they were produced on the plant in late spring accompanied by small inedible fruit. The late arrival of fig leaves was quickly followed by the first agricultural harvests of the year the summer barley. In short, the sprouting of fig leaves indicated the start of a year's round of harvests, of which there were many in the Jewish agricultural year. The clear meaning of this is that Jesus regarded the fig as a 'sign' pointing to the coming harvests. Now if we read back to Matthew 21, we will find that the fig tree Jesus cured had sprouted again, so this sprouting was also a sign of things to come, and it was happening as they spoke. This is what Jesus was speaking about when he said 'this generation will not pass away until these things have happened.'

Jesus made it clear that God was constantly coming and harvesting in the world, and his comments about the fig tree meant that God's people are surrounded by signs which point to God's presence and to His final coming in the world, something which we can all see by the grace of God. Nevertheless, as Jesus says in the last verses, the cycle of life will finish one day, and on 'that day' (24:36) everything would come to an end. Understanding the signs is one thing, and the actual Parousia is another!

## Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Do you find it easy to follow what the prophets say? Discuss this with your group some of the texts quoted today.
2. What do you feel about the things Jesus says will happen to people as He comes in glory?
3. Why do you think God the Father did not allow Jesus to know the 'day and the time' of His coming in Glory?

## Discipleship

### Personal comment:

*Trying to understand scriptures such as these may well be daunting to many. But what are we going to do? Avoid the problems thrown up by scripture? Agree with anyone, preacher or scholar who gives their opinions? Surely the wise and right way is to try and come to terms with both the easy and the difficult things of scripture; and even if we find things impenetrably hard, at least we will understand that sometimes, God's Word is like that. The Parousia is probably the most difficult subject that arises from the Bible, because it is about the future. I strongly suggest that the only clues we have to it are the prophecies of Old Testament and of Jesus, and we must read them as carefully as possible.*

### Ideas for discipleship programme

- Read through this passage of scripture several times and check out whether you can spot the difference between what Jesus says will actually happen when he comes, and the sign of it as given in the parable of the fig tree.