

Prayer

In Your Majesty, Lord God of awesome power and might,
Accept our prayers, and the glory and praise we bring.
Our songs may say more about us than they do about You;
Our prayers may display ignorance compared to Your wisdom;
Our deeds may fall short of what You have called us to do.
So we confess our sins, and trust in Your forgiveness;
Thank You, Majestic Heavenly Father; we praise You. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Weapons of War

Pray for the armed forces of your country. Whatever you think of what they do, those involved need our special prayers because of what they do. Pray as the Spirit leads.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for all who suffer and have no access to medical care*
- *Give thanks for the security of the life God has given you*
- *Pray for Thailand as its people continue to seek democracy*

Meditation

Do not bear your pain alone;
Let Christ the healer lead your soul towards the light
And bring you to a place of peace again.

Do not foster unforgiveness;
Let Him who loved the ones who nailed Him to a tree
Show you how to live and love again.

Do not be quick to offer blame;
Let Christ who called the just to 'cast the first stone'
Now whisper truth and justice in your ear.

Do not let your inner sin defeat you;
Let Him who conquered evil stir your spirit deep within
To turn away from Satan's traps once more.

Do not forget the love of Jesus Christ;
Give Him space within your inner soul to live and work
To heal, to change you, and save you. Alleluia!

Bible Study - Matthew 24:9-14

⁹ 'Then they will hand you over to be tortured and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. ¹⁰ Then many will lose faith, and will betray and hate one another, ¹¹ and many false prophets will arise and deceive many. ¹² Then because of the increase of evildoing, the love of many will grow cold; ¹³ but those who endure to the end will be saved. ¹⁴ The good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to all nations; and then the end will come.'

Review

Our brief passage today is a description by Jesus of what will happen within His church before the time of the 'End', also called the 'parousia'. It was on the Mount of Olives, where Jesus sat with His disciples, that Zechariah prophesied the coming of the Messiah, splitting the mountain in two and enabling streams of water to flood into the surrounding deserts to leave the great city of Jerusalem aloft and in glory (Zech. 14:4ff). The disciples, however, posed Jesus the question 'tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and the end of the age?' (24:3). Our reading today, though, is only the beginning of what Jesus had to say and it is more general than specific. It clearly described the life of the early church and is true of the life of the church even today, but the passage still anticipates Jesus' coming again.

Persecutions, and 'all nations' The theme of the persecution of disciples crops up in almost every phase of Jesus teaching (5:11,12, 10:17ff, 13:21, 23:34 etc.), and Jesus has already spoken about all manner of coming persecution from martyrdom to repression. Up to this point in the Gospel, however, those who might hate or persecute the disciples and the coming Church of God were assumed to be Jews; as in the opposition to the Gospel by Jews in chapter 10, and the persecution of the prophets (21;33ff).

In this passage, the picture changed dramatically when Jesus said 'you will be hated by all nations because of me'. By saying this, Jesus anticipated the universal mission of His people, the church, and their persecution. Jesus had jumped ahead of the disciples, who were barely able to understand the complex future that lay before them. It was one thing to be hated and persecuted by the Jewish people, and yet another to be hated by 'all nations' (the word for 'nations' being the Greek word we often translate as 'Gentiles')! It is essential to read this prophecy of Jesus together with the great commission in Matthew 28:18,19, which both speak about Jesus' intention for the Gospel to be preached to the whole world.

Distress, false prophets (again) and loss of faith It is extraordinary that Jesus should talk of His disciples and the future church as rife with loss of faith, betrayal and hatred (24:10), but these are His exact words. This was not occasional trouble, but the truth about what would happen once the church of God had to make its spiritual voice heard in the world. Jesus prophesied this because He knew that it would happen and He wanted His disciples to know that it was bound to happen, and gnaw away at the life of the Church. We should not try to question Jesus' prophecy or suggest that the Church of God should surely be better than that. God know full well that despite His provision of salvation, His people live in a fallen world, which will resist the Gospel. It is salutary to realise that although God was entirely realistic about His Church and its mission, He still trusts it completely with the message of salvation for all people.

Jesus did give one reason for the distress within the church, which is the deceptions of false teaching (24:11). Jesus had just been battling with the scribes and Pharisees over the nature of God's Word, and had a good idea of what 'false teaching' was. Many of Jesus' disputes boiled down to an argument about how to interpret scripture, with Jesus insistent that scripture interprets scripture, and the Pharisees believing that tradition interprets scripture. His teaching and example helped the early church as it battle with false teachers and decided who was right according to the witness of the apostles, gathered in the form of the emerging New Testament. From this has come the doctrinal basis of the church that has passed on the faith to us today. The place of scripture should not be compromised in the life of the church today!

Endurance to the end, and the proclamation of the Good News. Entirely reasonably, Jesus observed that 'the love of many will grow cold' (24:12) due to the presence of evil in

the world in which His people would live and witness, as is true today. He went on to say something far more positive and encouraging however; something He had not said before but which is of the greatest importance to all who believe. He said, 'but those who endure to the end will be saved'. This assurance from Jesus was an encouragement to the disciples who first heard it, and it was the support they needed to hear in order to keep their faith secure through the troubled times ahead. It is also a promise for all God's people, which assures them that if they persevere through trouble in the Lord's strength, they will be victorious.

The reason for Jesus' encouragement is not, however, for our personal comfort; it is given so that the Good News may be proclaimed (24:14). This last verse of our text is a small masterpiece of instruction, telling us about God's ultimate purposes, 'the Good News of the Kingdom will be proclaimed'; telling us where this will happen, 'throughout the world'; and telling us why this will happen, 'as a testimony to all nations'. Finally, it tells us the consequences; 'and then the end will come'.

Despite all the problems and persecutions, the powerful work of God is such that His Church will persist and survive to achieve its goal, and it will bear witness to the whole world concerning the Good News of the Kingdom of God. Further, its purpose is to do this until God judges it right to draw history to a close, when 'the End will come'.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. How do you respond to knowing that God expects you to have trouble in your life because you are a Christian?
2. Can you give examples of what you believe to be false prophets in the church today? How do you know, and how should they be judged?
3. Is the Church of God fulfilling its role today? If not, why not, and how will it change?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

The challenge facing us in this text is to accept that things will not be easy for us just because we are Christians. It seems to be embedded in the minds of modern Christians that if you are a good person, God will give you a good life in terms of health and wealth and having a nice time; but this is just not true. God wants to give you a good life, but that is to be found in the fulfilment of the service of others and of Him. I thank God that I have found this to be so.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Failure in the life of the church is a difficult matter. Reflect on those occasions when you have been involved in something that has gone wrong and ask yourself whether you have really learned the lessons of failure.*
- *Pray for those who experience distress in the life of the church because of the actions of others and the evil which creeps into the life of the church. Do your best to be an agent of peace.*

Final Prayer

Keep me in Your presence, Lord Jesus; keep me close to Your side as I walk the path before me. Then, when difficulty comes, may I have confidence, through You, to deal with everything in the way You would wish me to. Thank You for Your help, Lord Jesus; AMEN