

Prayer

We turn to You, awesome God of heaven and earth.
You are the great artist who paints myriad pictures in the sky
You are the wonderful parent who cares about everything we do
You are the best friend who travels alongside us on the journey of life
You are the amazing scientist who invents things for our use and pleasure
We turn to You, awesome God of heaven and earth, for You have turned to us.
AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

The regular features of prayer are praise, confession, prayer for others etc. Today, focus on saying the prayers that come least naturally to you.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for the witness of the church** Pray for those who are training to do pioneering missionary work of whatever kind.
- Give thanks for the joy of love and of being with those you love
- Pray for the USA in the aftermath of passing healthcare legislation

Meditation

Dear Jesus, You are our help and our comfort,
You assist us according to our need.

When suffering and illness envelop our souls,
You cover us with healing love.

When worry and anxiety eat away at our hearts,
You robe us with the comfort of peace.

When fear and dread fill our stumbling emotions,
You protect us with a guard of angels.

When panic and horror take hold of our minds,
You clothe us with the righteousness of Christ.

When misery and distress overwhelm our spirits,
You wrap us around with Your mercy.

Dear Jesus, You are our help and our comfort,
And You are sufficient for all needs!

Bible passage – Matthew 26:47-56

⁴⁷ While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived together with a large crowd with swords and clubs, coming from the chief priests and the elders of the people. ⁴⁸ Now the betrayer had arranged a sign with them, saying, 'The one I will kiss, He is the man; arrest him.'

⁴⁹ He immediately came up to Jesus and said, 'Greetings, Rabbi!' and kissed him. ⁵⁰ Jesus replied, 'Friend, do what you are here to do.' Then they came forward and took hold of Jesus and arrested him. ⁵¹ At this, one of those with Jesus reached for his sword, drew it, and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. ⁵² Then Jesus said to him, 'Withdraw your sword; for all who draw the sword will perish by the sword. ⁵³ Do you think I am unable to call

on my Father, who would at once supply me with more than twelve legions of angels? ⁵⁴ But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled which say it must happen in this way?’

⁵⁵ Jesus said to the crowds, ‘Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a rebel? I sat in the temple teaching daily, and you did not arrest me. ⁵⁶ Yet all this has taken place so that the scriptures of the prophets may be fulfilled.’ Then all the disciples deserted him and fled.

Bible Study

Review

This passage records the terrible events of the betrayal of Jesus by Judas. Matthew records the story in a simple and almost brutally plain manner, but this allows us the space to think about what happened and feel the horror of the world’s betrayal of its Saviour. This passage deserves to be read several times before it is studied, simply because we need to read it deeply and find the many layers of feelings and tragedy within it. This is a story full of mystery and intrigue, and the more we read, the more we will find within this extraordinary ‘Word of God’.

After all the stories of Jesus’ ministry and the intrigue of His path to Jerusalem, we have finally come to the long concluding story of the Gospel. Here, Judas identifies Jesus to the armed guards, and this enables them to drag Jesus off to the High Priest and the Sanhedrin for a formal trial. Although Matthew does not record it, Judas had left the table of the last supper (see John 13:27) in order to arrange the betrayal, and he came to the Garden with what Matthew describes as a ‘*large crowd with swords and clubs*’ (26:47). It is most likely that the number of them was sufficient to deal with the twelve disciples who were, of course, hopelessly unprepared both physically and spiritually. The arresting group probably contained a mixture of Temple Guards loyal to the High Priest and official guardians of the Temple (John 18:3,12), together with some other supporters of the chief priests and elders; it was the Temple Guards who would have had swords (26:47).

Judas greeted Jesus with the pre-arranged sign of the kiss (26:49), but his greeting was far from normal. As we have seen in recent studies, Jesus was called ‘Lord’ by the disciples, but Judas Himself called Jesus ‘Master’ (26:25), a title of lesser status than ‘Lord’, or ‘Messiah’. This shows how disillusioned Judas was at Jesus, for whatever reason. However, this infamous kiss was no sign of convenience, for a kiss on the cheek was only done in public on formal occasions, which this was not. Also, kissing was used as a public sign of reconciliation between two parties after a dispute, and in addition, proper decorum meant that a disciple should only kiss a rabbi when invited to do so. For these reasons, we may suppose that Judas’ kiss was no neutral signal, it was an insult. Moreover, he accepted Jesus as a teacher but not as the Messiah, as countless thousands have done for centuries, and thence misunderstood both Jesus and His mission.

Much of the rest of the story illustrates Jesus’ non-violent acceptance of what was happening. He had dealt with His own feelings about all this when speaking to His Father in the Garden of Gethsemane, and He had found His peace with His calling. In that strength, He calmed the situation that developed when someone cut off the ear of the slave of the High Priest (26:51). Jesus was also acutely aware for the need for Him to resist the temptations of Satan at this critical point in His ministry; He was unwilling to call down ‘*legions of angels*’ (26:53) to protect Him from the mob. They had come to do their work and take Him into custody, and Jesus accepted this.

The story Matthew tells describes how Jesus painfully endured all that was happening, not with stoicism, but by choice, obediently walking the path His Father had laid before Him. His life of ministry was now complete, and He did not need to control events around Him anymore. From this point onwards to His death Jesus was physically constrained, yet in a way that fulfilled His own prophetic teaching of non-violence (5:21,38f.), and He exercised a powerful, frequently inactive and sometimes silent control over all that was going on. His purpose continued to be to do the will of His Father, as it had throughout His ministry, and as He had just accepted in prayer, whilst in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- The betrayal of Christ by Judas
- The use of the sword and the issue of non-violence
- The fulfilment of Scripture

Going Deeper

The betrayal of Christ by Judas

What Judas said and did must have reflected his core beliefs, rather than indicate a temporary lapse of understanding. He insulted Jesus directly (see above), which means that it is wrong to accept the commonly held view that Judas was really a believer in Jesus as Messiah, but who mistakenly tried to force Him to 'show His hand' by hastening the final showdown with the authorities. No, it is almost certain that Judas' words showed that he had not accepted Him as Messiah.

Jesus knew what was going on too, and stood firm, replying to the greeting of betrayal with the words '*Friend, do what you are here to do*' (26:50). The Greek of this sentence is hard to translate, and you may find this quite different in some versions of the Bible, indeed, one possible version is '*Friend, why are you here?*' I have given the translation above because I believe Jesus already knew what Judas was doing from what had happened at the Last Supper, and He wished to move on from the tense and difficult situation. Even the word 'Friend' is strained, as we can tell from its use by Jesus in two parables (20:13 and 22:12) where it occurs when relationships either have or are just about to break down irrevocably.

In the midst of all this, Jesus' voice always commanded authority; notice how the guards did not come to arrest Jesus after Judas' kiss, but after He had invited them, which indicates his willingness to come quietly and without fuss (26:50). Indeed, from the moment that Jesus speaks, He comes across as being passive yet in control of the situation. He dealt calmly with all that happened and allowed Himself to be taken away despite the furore developing around Him. This attitude meant that no one else was injured or hurt as a consequence of His arrest. He did not want people to try to become martyrs for His cause before His work had been completed!

The use of the sword and the issue of non-violence

We already know that some of the Temple guards had brought swords, but it is very surprising that '*one of those with Jesus*' (26:51) had a sword and was willing to use it. John identified this person as Simon Peter (see John 18:10). Perhaps He had acquired the sword and held it secretly, wanting to defend the Lord to fulfil His promise to die with Him (26:35); but we are not this by Matthew, so this can only remain presumption on our part. On the night, the result of Peter's petulance was that a slave of the High Priest had his ear cut off (John names him Malthus, see John 18:10). Again, the other Gospels record Jesus' sympathy and subsequent healing of the slave (Luke 22:51), but Matthew does not, focussing exclusively on Jesus' own authoritative command to cease the violence. This is highlighted as Jesus commands '*withdraw your sword*' (26:52).

Scripture may well have influenced Matthew when he strove to interpret the story for his readers. Jesus' words '*all who draw the sword will perish by the sword*' (26:52) remind us of the scriptural blessing of Noah by God; '*whoever sheds someone's blood will have their blood shed by someone else*' (Genesis 9:6), for example. In addition, the prophets say that those who resist God will die by the sword (e.g. see Amos 9:10). However, a more powerful scripture for Matthew than this was the image of the lamb led to the slaughter in Isaiah 53, for this text lies behind so much of his Gospel. Isaiah prophesied in his later prophecies that God's Messiah would be a servant who was non-violent and the victim of violence, and the picture of the sheathed sword has become an icon of non-violence throughout the generations. In Scripture it is reinforced by the text from Revelation (13:10) '*if you kill with the sword, then by the sword you must be killed.*'

Jesus was clearly unhappy with the violence and use of swords. He went on to declare that twelve legions of angels were at His beck and call, but He would not succumb to Satan's temptation (see 4:6), and call them to His personal defence. He would live out the non-violence and non-resistance he had taught at the beginning of His ministry in the Sermon on the Mount, '*do not resist an evil doer*' (5:38-39) and '*love your enemies*' (5:43-44).

We can clearly see that in taking this stand, Jesus was Himself more in charge of the situation than were the soldiers. His being taken captive was something He allowed to happen so that the Father's will was done; he had made this choice in prayer, only a few moments earlier. The agony in the Garden had prepared Jesus for this moment, the initial shocking point at which hands were laid on Him to lead Him to His death.

The fulfilment of scripture.

When Jesus declared '*but how then would scripture be fulfilled which say it must happen in this way*' (26:54), there is little doubt that He was identifying with the prophecy found in Isaiah 53 about the 'suffering servant'; '*by a perversion of justice he was taken away*' (Is 53:8) '*yet it was the will of the Lord ...*' (Is 53:10). These scriptures help us to understand what happened to Jesus and why it happened, but of themselves, they are not enough.

When Matthew recorded Jesus' life, he believed that His teaching was a prophetic interpretation of the whole Law of God. The scribes and Pharisees had ruled the people of God for centuries by placing the first five books of the Bible (the 'Law') above all other scripture, and they based their whole religious system upon this way of approaching Scripture. Jesus would not accept this; rather, He elevated the importance of the prophets, and made it clear that God had raised them up to reinterpret His Law in a new way. Their work was to interpret the Law for a new era when the Messiah would come and bring God's rule on earth. This point is made not just by Isaiah, for example, but by other prophets (Jer 31:31f., Zech 7:12f.), and if we read the parables (e.g. the parable of the tenants Matt 21:33ff), we will find that this is the central point made by Jesus Himself.

As the arrest of Jesus draws to its close, Jesus challenged the group that had come out to take Him. Why had they come out with swords and clubs? He was freely available. Perhaps He was chastising them and challenging them to be open. The agents of deceit and subterfuge were exposed for what they were by their captive, Jesus, who made Himself freely available to all, even those who sought His life.

This was the moment that the disciples fled the scene (26:56). I suspect that they did this because they knew there was nothing they could now do to change the situation, and they were frightened. Jesus was being taken without resistance, but they were unprepared, having been unable to pray about it with Jesus in the hours beforehand, because of tiredness. If they were as dangerous to the authorities as was Jesus, they would surely have been taken as well. However, their 'little faith' (Matt 6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; 17:20) was exposed by the whole incident, and they were therefore able to flee unimpeded. They deserted Jesus, unable at that time to stand the critical test of His calling, compromising the benefits of all they had done to 'give up all' (4:18-22) for Jesus.

Application

This whole of this story is overlaid with sadness; we can see within it the sadness of Judas himself and the confused reasons for his betrayal. We can also see the sadness of Jesus as He was greeted by Judas, as He put a stop to the fighting, and as He saw the response of the disciples. Lastly we can feel the sadness of the disciples as they ran away, unable to cope with the situation unfolding before their eyes.

Yet what happened was, in truth, as much a fulfilment of scripture as any other part of Jesus' life. Jesus had taught that the way to read God's word was to interpret it according to the prophets, and they had all spoken of God's path of salvation through suffering. Jeremiah's prophecies arose from his personal suffering, and he ultimately prophesied the renewal of God's people by the Spirit (Jer 31:31-34). Ezekiel prophesied the renewal of God's people in worship out of the suffering of exile (Ez 37 onwards). The great prophet Isaiah spoke of God's redemption and salvation of His people through the work of the 'suffering servant' (Is 52:13ff). Yet all these prophets said that there was hope for God's people beyond suffering, and this always suggests that there is hope for life beyond death. So our sadness is tinged with an un-dared-for hope, built upon God's word and our knowledge of what did in fact happen to Jesus, after His betrayal and subsequent death.

The religious authorities had finally managed to get Jesus where they wanted by evil means; and they were the people who had earlier accused Jesus of being in league with the Devil (12:24)! As they led Jesus off toward His trial and death, they thought they were doing what was right before God. Nothing could be further from the truth. God was indeed in control of what was happening and was in control even of the actions of these religiously ignorant people. In church tradition, the 'Passion' of Jesus is normally defined as starting at the very point when Jesus was handed over to the authorities. So Jesus' 'Passion' had started. Ahead of Him lay His life's end and the Cross.

As for us and our own response to what happened to Jesus, our own faith seems to fall somewhat short before the awful majesty of what happened to Jesus in His last hours. That is as it should be. Nothing we can or will ever do 'matches up' to what Jesus did for us in those moments. However, there is something important in our faith about the idea of being prepared to face even death itself. Christian martyrs have taken this choice throughout the ages, and they are an example to us. I do not believe that God asks people to accept death as a necessary consequence of faith, as Jesus clearly had to do. However, all of us face the prospect of death, and we must all remain aware that from time to time, those who stand for Jesus will be killed and martyred just as He was.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. In your group, discuss why you believe Judas did what He did. Do you feel that there are other possibilities not mentioned in the study?
2. To what extent is it true that 'all who draw the sword will die by the sword'? Can you give any relevant examples?
3. What does this passage teach you about the meaning of Jesus' life and work?

Topics covered by this text

- *The betrayal of Christ*
- *Violence and non-violence*
- *Jesus, the willing victim*

Personal comments by author

It is almost impossible to try and imagine what this event must have been like. As I think about it, I look at a print of a painting on the wall of my study. It is the 'betrayal of Christ' by the extraordinary and prodigious young painter Caravaggio. He did not pretend to try and paint people of Jesus' day at the scene. He painted people of his own day, and himself standing over the scene. Jesus stands as if shocked, with Judas pressing forward to kiss Jesus. A soldier whose face is not seen grabs Jesus, and a disciple to the side runs away from Christ. Then, standing at the back and peering over the scene stands Caravaggio himself, holding a lantern. In a powerful way the painting says 'I was there', and invites the viewer to think the same, with all the emotions of that awful moment in the history of the world.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Spend a half hour in silence and reflect on what Jesus did for us when he was betrayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. Let the Holy Spirit move in your heart to make you ready for anything that God may require of you.*
- *How can you best be ready to face death? It may be that you need to think about what this will mean and pray for the Lord to help you face the questions posed by what happens to you when you die. You may well find that spending time with this question will help you value your life far more.*

Final Prayer

Heavenly Father, we feel weak and inadequate before Your glorious power and might. As we read about the supreme sacrifice You made on our behalf, we ask You to make this event real for us, that we may not just understand it, but accept it personally. Then, may we receive again from You the gift of life You died to give, and complete both Your joy, and ours: AMEN
