

Prayer

Praise You, Lord God Almighty for rest and peace, for joy and freedom, for quiet and tranquillity and for the vigour of life. In Your wisdom You have created all things to work perfectly together, and You have given each of us a life that will please us and please You if we will follow Your will. Give us the grace to yield to Your good pleasure and design for our lives, and so be satisfied and complete. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Read a favourite passage of Scripture out loud; for example, 1 Cor 13, or Eph 1. Then pray according to what the Lord brings to your mind.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for the witness of the church** Pray for those who seek to witness by serving the local community. Pray that Christ will be honoured
- Pray children who are abused, in whatever circumstances
- Give thanks for the many different gifts God gives to people

Meditation

God of wonder, bless us with joy;
A gift of pleasure, leading to contentment.

God of love, bless us with faithfulness;
A gift of loyalty, binding us with others.

God of mercy, bless us with sympathy;
A gift of understanding, reaching out to all.

God of patience, bless us with endurance;
A gift of determination, sustaining our faith.

God of grace, bless us with kindness,
A gift of compassion, blessing our relationships.

God of peace, bless us with contentment,
A gift of tranquillity, calming the troubled breast.

Bible passage – Matthew 27:1-10

¹ When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people discussed with each other how to have Jesus killed. ² They bound him, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate the governor.

³ When he saw that Jesus was condemned, Judas, who betrayed him, was filled with regret. He returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. ⁴ He said, 'I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.' But they replied, 'What is that to us? That's your problem.' ⁵ Judas threw down the money in the temple, left and went and hanged himself.

⁶ The chief priests then picked up the money and said, 'It is against the law to put this into the treasury, because it is blood money.' ⁷ So they agreed together to use it to buy the potter's field as a foreigners cemetery. ⁸ That is why the field has been called the Field of Blood to this day. ⁹ In this way, the words of the prophet Jeremiah were fulfilled:

'They took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of the one with a price on his head, agreed by some of the people of Israel, ¹⁰ and they paid it for the potter's field, as the Lord commanded me.'

Bible Study

Review

This tragic reading describes the fate of Judas, and before this, what happened to Jesus in the early morning after He had been arrested and brought before Caiaphas. The events of the evening before had not been orderly, and may not have been conducted properly, for if they had, then there would have been no need for further discussions about what to do with Jesus (27:1). Caiaphas had decided that Jesus' response to his questioning amounted to blasphemy, but everyone knew that Pilate, the Roman governor would not be interested in this. The chief priests and the elders '*discussed with each other how to have Jesus killed*' for one reason alone; they still needed to get a good reason to persuade Pilate to kill Jesus. As we will see, their chosen route was to present Jesus as a danger to Roman security, and with this decided, they 'bound' Jesus and led Him to Pilate as a criminal (27:2).

The story then continues by telling what happened to Judas. We would like to know more about Judas' real motives for betraying Jesus, but the only thing Matthew says is that he was '*filled with regret*' (27:3). For this reason, Judas took back to the Temple the money he had been paid, and when those who had given it refused to take it back, he threw it down. It was the last thing he did before hanging himself (27:5). Matthew then tells us what was done with the money, and he explains this with a quote from the Old Testament (27:9,10). Most of this sounds relatively trivial to us today, but Matthew was clearly concerned to explain it all as the fulfilment of Scripture, and we will look further at what this means, later on in the study.

There are a number of interesting features to this story however, and one of them concerns the way Matthew has ordered his account of what happened. It seems that Matthew placed this episode here in order to contrast it with what happened to Peter after his failure (26:69-75). In this way, it enables us to begin to see Peter's story in a positive light. After his failure and denial of Jesus, Peter began a process of rehabilitation through tears of remorse. Judas, however, after his failure and betrayal of Jesus, was full of regrets at what he had done (27:3) and attempted to absolve himself by returning the money he had taken for treachery. After failing to do this he could not live with himself and took his life (27:5). The contrast is clear; Peter will eventually come through his failure to salvation, but Judas tragically condemns himself before God.

We can only find this story about Judas here in Matthew; Mark and Luke do not say anything about the fate of Judas, and neither does John. We may well then be puzzled to find that in Acts, Luke tells a quite different story about how Judas died (Acts 1:15-20). Luke says that Judas died by falling over in a field he has bought for himself with his 'blood money'! This is quite different from what we have read here, but there are two clear links between the stories. Firstly, each story records the death of Judas, and secondly, each story tells us about the land called a 'Field of Blood', and we will discover that this designation is connected to a number of Old Testament prophecies.

If we look at the way Matthew has told his narrative here, then we can get a better perspective on what we have read. Very simply, Judas handed Jesus over to the Jewish authorities, who handed Him over to Pilate, who handed Jesus over to the soldiers to be killed. Then, within this epic story are two important sub-plots; firstly that of Peter who fulfilled Jesus' prophecy that he would deny Him (see 26:34), and secondly that of Judas who fulfilled Jesus' prophecy that he would betray Him (see 26:24). Up to this point in Jesus' Passion, Matthew's story has switched between these 'plots'; but from now on, the story will deal with Jesus alone.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- The handing over of Peter to Pilate (27:1,2)
- Judas changes his mind, and commits suicide (27:3,4,5)
- The purchase of the potter's field (27:6,7,8)
- The prophecy of Jeremiah (27:9,10)

Going Deeper

The handing over of Jesus to Pilate (27:1,2)

In the opening verses (1&2), the chief priests and elders needed to discuss tactics concerning how to deal with Jesus now He had been 'captured'. Caiaphas had made a judgement that Jesus was guilty of blasphemy the night before (26:65), and no-one dissented from that decision. All they had to do was to decide how to get the Roman authorities to proceed with the death penalty. If the chief priests could have killed Jesus there and then, they would, but it was part of their agreement with their Roman overlords that

they would not take the law into their own hands. Pilate, the Roman Governor, was known to be a man who was impatient with Jewish religious demands and prejudices, so the chief priests had to be careful. If Jesus was presented to him as someone who had simply broken their religious codes, they knew he would not be interested, so they had to be very careful.

Pilate is the last of the major characters of Matthew's Gospel to be introduced. He was the fifth governor (strictly, the 'praefectus' in Latin) over Judea and Jerusalem, and he lived most of the year in Caesarea Maritima, and came to Jerusalem at major festivals in order to make sure, personally, that law and order was kept. He was a cruel man, and other documents of the day make it obvious that he had a vicious character and was unafraid to mete out the death penalty if he caught the slightest whiff of trouble. For example, Luke records in his Gospel an incident when Jesus talked about the cruelty of Pilate; He told of a time when Pilate cruelly '*mixed the blood of Galileans with their sacrifices*' (Luke 13:1f.). We do not know exactly what this means or why it was done, but it sounds unbearably cruel.

Judas changed his mind – and committed suicide (27:3,4,5)

The theme in Matthew's Gospel now switches to Judas, and the tragic story of his suicide. It is interesting that he acted as if he knew that Jesus was going to die as a result of his actions., because he talked of betraying '*innocent blood*' (27:4), and later on, the whole story revolves around the 'blood money' Judas received for the betrayal, this term meaning money that was responsible for someone's death. Jesus, however, had yet to appear before Pilate and was certainly not yet dead!

We must therefore assume that Judas knew what the consequences of his actions would be, and he was full of regret because '*innocent blood*' would be shed (27:3). Perhaps he was aware of Deuteronomy 27:25 which says '*cursed be anyone who takes a bribe to shed innocent blood*'. He therefore approached the chief priests to give the money back (27:4) and attempt to undo the things he had set in motion. The proper thing for a priest to do in these circumstances would be to perform appropriate sacrifices and rituals for dealing with this sin, and according to Mosaic Law for guilt offerings, re-consecrate the money; after all, it had come from the Temple in the first place! However, the chief priests were as guilty in the matter of Jesus' betrayal as Judas, and they would not accept the money, returning it to Judas saying '*what is that to us? That's your problem*' (27:4). They did not see their own sin at all.

Judas responded by furiously throwing the money back into the Temple (27:5). The particular word for 'temple' used here meant the inner temple where the priests performed their rituals. Judas would have had to throw it over a wall or through an open gate to do this. There is even a hint of this on the Old Testament, where the prophet Zechariah refers to a rejected shepherd throwing money back into the temple (Zech 11:13). However, Judas was now in a desperate state, and he went out and hanged himself.

Some have considered this to be an honourable act, but that seems hardly likely. The other story of Judas' death in Acts 1:18 is a grisly tale, and although it describes a different death, it certainly does not indicate any 'honour'. Suicide was considered as highly dishonourable amongst Jews, and the only other person recorded by scripture as hanging himself was Ahithophel, the disgraced advisor to David (2 Samuel 17:23). He had committed suicide after betraying David and abusing his position, advising Absalom (David's son) after he deposed his father (2 Sam 15ff). Now, the same fate came to the one who betrayed the 'Son of David'.

The purchase of the potter's field (27:6,7,8)

Unwilling to re-consecrate the 'blood money' from Judas, the chief priests decided on buying 'the potter's field' as a cemetery for Gentiles (27:7). In Hebrew 'Akeldama' means 'field of blood', and refers to a field located across the Hinnom valley opposite Jerusalem, which was a historic source of pottery clay. In order to make sense of the story at this point, there are two Old Testament prophecies that should be born in mind.

The first is one of Jeremiah's most famous prophecies and concerns a potter and pots. Jeremiah 18 is a famous prophecy describing God as a potter shaping Israel as a potter shapes pots. On the surface, it is a wonderful and meaningful picture of God taking care of His people. However in chapter 19, Jeremiah is called to pronounce judgement on the Israelite nation by going to the Hinnom valley to the 'gate of potsherds' to demonstrate God's judgement by smashing the pots made the previous day, and mentioned in the previous chapter! The 'potter's field' was therefore a symbol of God's judgement.

The second prophecy is from Zechariah 11, which was a well known Messianic prophecy in Jesus' day. In it, Zechariah acted out the deeds of a shepherd bringing judgement on Israel; 'And the Lord said to me, "Throw it to the potter" - the handsome price at which they priced me! So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them into the house of the Lord to the potter' (27:13). It certainly seems as if Matthew was aware of both these prophecies as he sought to explain what Judas had done.

The prophecy of Jeremiah (27:9,10)

Strangely, these verses contain a quote from Zechariah 11:13, which sums up the whole story of what happened to Judas very well. However, Matthew attributes them to Jeremiah not to Zechariah! Unfortunately, although the theme of judgement and a 'potter's field' is found in Jeremiah, there is certainly no reference to 30 pieces of silver in Jeremiah! However, if we read Jeremiah 18 and 19, we will find that Jeremiah was inspired by the scene at the potter's house to prophesy about the need for God to demolish the old 'pot' of Israel, represented by its religious leaders and their kings, in order to begin again a new work with His people. In Zechariah 11, we find a Messianic prophecy about the true Shepherd of Israel who broke the Old Covenant between God and Israel.

What is going on here? It can be difficult for us to come to terms with the fact that New Testament writers frequently quote the Old in a loose manner, certainly not literally. However the writers of the New Testament, inspired by God, often quoted the Old Testament in order to highlight themes and this is what appears to be happening here. The two prophecies of Jeremiah and Zechariah may well have become fused in people's minds, including Matthew's. There are a number of examples of this process in other parts of Scripture, for example, Mark 1:2 is composed of the themes from Malachi 3:1 and Is 40:3 and yet it is attributed to Isaiah. Also, Romans 9:27 derives from themes found in Hosea 2:1 and Isaiah 10:22, and Paul attributed this to Isaiah alone.

As we look at the text today, there is no doubt that Matthew used both these prophetic themes to explain Judas' actions and his death. When put together, they speak of God's judgement of the man who betrayed Jesus, the true 'shepherd' of Israel (see Zechariah). Then, using Jeremiah's prophetic images of the potter's field, they speak of the judgement of God on those religious leaders of Israel who had become 'false shepherds'. By this, Matthew meant the religious authorities who had bribed Judas, they were as culpable as the man they paid to betray Jesus. They both failed to appreciate that Jesus was the Messiah.

Some of this is a little difficult for us today because we think of the 'potter' image from Jeremiah 18 as a somewhat more of a cosy picture of how God does His will through us (as in the words of the song: 'I am the potter, and You are the clay ...'). These sentiments are understandable, but the prophecies of Jeremiah are really about judgement, as anyone who reads both Jeremiah 18 and 19 for themselves will discover!

Application

We can find little sympathy for Judas or justification of his actions within this passage of Scripture today. To do so now would be to fly in the face of the story as told by Matthew, and we have no other means of knowing about what he did and why he did it. In the end, there was a degree of inevitability about everything that happened, and this is why Matthew was keen to present it as the fulfilment of Scripture about the coming of the Messiah. Both Judas and the Jewish leaders acted according to their own convictions and choices, but they followed a path of evil prophesied by others beforehand. People like Jeremiah and Zechariah had seen how God's work would be opposed and when the time came, their prophecies were proved right. It is worth noting the incredibly grand scale of the prophecies quoted by Matthew and their interpretation. This is the purpose of true prophecy, for God wants us to see how the things that happen to us fit into His greater plans. Generally speaking, it should be born in mind that those who claim to be prophets and speak only of small parts of God's work in this world, may well not have seen the full vision.

Over the centuries, some Christians have blamed not just Judas, but the Jews in general, for Jesus' death. This is to twist what we have read today. Scripture presents some as directly responsible for His death, and through them, the culpability of everyone else. Preachers have for centuries told Christian congregations that Christ died because of 'their' sins (not the Jews), so it is wrong to preach this evangelical message on the one hand, and then to blame Jews in general. What happened was the result of evil's grip on the Jewish leaders, Judas and the Roman authorities at that time, and it both represents and focuses all evil; Paul explains this well when he writes '*All have sinned ...*' (Romans 3:10ff).

It is far better to say that the death of Jesus was a mixture of the purpose and will of God for the salvation of the whole world, and the choices of real people to do evil at that specific time. The Jewish authorities of Jesus' day rejected Jesus, Judas betrayed Him, and the Romans killed him; and by their choices they became individually caught up in the eternal purposes of God. It is worth noting that while all this was happening, Peter was caught up by the same sin and evil, but he chose the way of repentance, and he became caught up in the purposes of God in a new and different way. Thank God that after Jesus died and rose again, He showed us that the way of repentance chosen by Peter brought new life, and that we are now able to live in the light of that Gospel. Judas was condemned by his conscience, but in the mercy of the risen Christ, this need never happen to anyone today.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Do you feel that Judas deserves a more sympathetic hearing than this study has given? What are your reasons?
2. Read through the prophecy of Zechariah 11, and check that you understand it and how it relates to this text.
3. Read through Jeremiah 18 and 19, and check that you understand it and how it relates to this text.

Topics covered by this text

- *The handing of Jesus over to the Romans*
- *The consequences to Judas of his betrayal*
- *The fulfilment of Scripture for the coming of the Messiah and His Kingdom*

Personal comments by author

The choices we make largely determine what happens later in our lives, and most of us know what it is like to make choices which lead to tragedy, but we pray that none would be as tragic as that of Judas. Whatever sympathy we may wish to afford him, he chose a course of action that ended in the tragedy of the death of both Jesus and Himself, and he knew he had failed God. It is a dramatic story, but it does warn us that it is possible to completely misunderstand Jesus and go the wrong way. The way to avoid this is to have the humility of Peter and repent of our wrongdoing and our bad choices rather than try to hide them.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Reflect on the differences between the story of Judas and the story of Peter. How can these stories help you find spiritual direction?*
- *Pray for all those who are struggling to find an answer to their questions about Jesus, and feel that they do not understand Him. If you know any such person, make them a subject of your prayers.*

Final Prayer

Almighty Lord and God, I place the strains and stresses of this day into Your hands. I confess that I am often unsure about whether I have done Your will in the course of my day. Nevertheless, I commit my work, my recreation, my words and my intentions, into Your hands for the further the work of Your Kingdom. I also ask You to give me a glimpse of how the things I have done fit into Your greater and eternal plans. AMEN
