

## Prayers

### Opening prayer

We talk to You each day, Lord Jesus, because You are there. Even when it feels as if You are distant, You are in truth as close as the clothes we wear and the ground under our feet. Talk to us as we talk to You, we pray, and may our inner ears hear the voice of the Spirit as clearly as we feel our emotions and know our thoughts. May our conversations with You be of real value, the treasures which sustain us through each day. Thank You, Lord Jesus. AMEN

### Prayer Suggestions

**Prayer ideas**\_(Alternatives that can broaden the experience of prayer)

If you can find the opportunity, shout out your requests to God as loud as you can. There is something powerful about releasing your prayers in this way (but not to inconvenience others by the noise we make!).

#### **On-going prayers**

- **Pray for the future of your country.** *Pray for the ecological future of your country. Each nation faces different issue to do with the environment, whether this is the sustainability of farming or future of fish stocks. Pray about those things that are important because they are God's will for Your nation*
- *Pray for the international money markets, and pray that Godly people who work within this will be empowered to make godliness and honesty work for the good of all.*
- *Praise God for His power to deliver from evil. Stand firm against the devil and all his works in whatever way seems most suitable for you.*

### Meditation

We search for You, O Lord, where will we find you?

Within the inner reaches of our minds?  
Within our conversations with friends?  
Within the magnificence of the created world?  
Within a reading from Your powerful Word?  
Within the graft and toil of our daily work?  
Within the deepest of our thoughts and feelings?

Yet as we sit and consider all these things,  
It is as if the Lord stands knocking  
In the midst of every thought, saying,  
'Will you let me in?'  
Of course, it is our choice;  
But the question remains until it is answered;  
Will we open the door?

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## Bible Study

Bible passage – Matthew 16: 1-12

<sup>1</sup> The Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test Jesus they asked him to show them a sign from heaven.

<sup>2</sup> He replied,

'In the evening, you say, 'It will be good weather tomorrow, because the sky is red.' <sup>3</sup> And in the morning, 'It will be stormy today, because the sky is red and overcast.' You know how to judge the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times! <sup>4</sup> An evil and unfaithful generation asks for a sign, but it will be given no sign except the sign of Jonah.'

Then he left them and went away.

<sup>5</sup> When the disciples reached the other side, they had forgotten to bring any bread. <sup>6</sup> Jesus said to them,

'Watch out, and be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.'

<sup>7</sup> But they questioned each other as they had not brought any bread.

<sup>8</sup> When Jesus became aware of this, He said,

'Why are you questioning yourselves, you of little faith, about having no bread? <sup>9</sup> Do you still not understand? Do you not remember how five loaves fed five thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? <sup>10</sup> Or how seven loaves fed four thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? <sup>11</sup> How can you fail to see that I was not speaking about bread? Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees!'

<sup>12</sup> Then they understood that he had not told them to guard against yeast within bread, but the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

## Review

Today's passage of scripture is somewhat strange. The first half of it describes yet another challenge to Jesus by the religious authorities (16:1f.). They sought proof of Jesus' claim to be God's Messiah, but Jesus was in no mood for their manoeuvring, and was utterly dismissive of their request. He dismissed their request with a withering comment (16:2,3) and walked away (16:4). Then after this, Matthew records a conversation demonstrating the enormous gap still between the disciples and Jesus (16:7-12). The disciples simply failed to understand what Jesus meant by saying '*the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees*' (16:6), and we are left wondering whether the disciple will ever learn to discern the things of God!

Certainly, this passage leaves us wondering where Jesus' ministry will lead. Those who flocked to receive healing and deliverance continued to live their lives as previously, but with the added benefit of being freed from disease or demons; was this all that Jesus had to offer? The authorities continued to challenge Jesus, believing that if they could trap Jesus and accuse Him of heresy they could stop His influence on ordinary people. Meanwhile, the disciples were struggling with all that was happening, and found it hard even to talk to their Lord and keep 'on the same wavelength'!

We also get the impression that Jesus was focussed on higher things; He was no longer interested in debating with the authorities (16:4), and was dismissive of the disciples for failing to understand the deeper things of God evident in all that happened to them (16:9-11). Our passage hints strongly that Jesus was thinking about the future and the ultimate goal of His work; this explains His frustration at the short-sightedness of all those around Him.

In His response to the Pharisees and Sadducees, Jesus uses language like that of prophets such as Isaiah and Ezekiel, who said that God would come to earth accompanied by 'signs' (Isaiah 7:14f., 38:7, 55:13 etc and Ezekiel 20:12f. 24:24f.). In this way, He dismissed the request for 'signs' on the basis that God had already given all the signs necessary for people to know what He was doing. The real issue was whether people accepted God's Messiah based on the evidence already before them, and what they would consequently do. The 'sign of the prophet Jonah' was about God's power to save, and Jesus was beginning to think about His own death and resurrection after 'three days and nights', just like Jonah inside the whale (16:4). It was the second time He had warned the Pharisees and Sadducees that they should consider the 'sign of Jonah' (see 12:39). He also wanted to break out of Judaism to enable all nations to know God's saving love, just as Jonah preached to large numbers of Gentiles in Nineveh (Jonah 3:3f, 4:11).

The conniving of the Pharisees and the Sadducees (16:5-12) could spread maliciously within God's people, and Jesus wanted the disciples to beware of such evil. He longed for people to see the evidence of God at work in the world and not seek answers to misdirected questions (16:9-11). God had already made the Messiah known through miracles, and those who asked for more proofs merely showed themselves up as people who had already rejected God's work!

So what can we make of this? Firstly, Jesus perceived a logic in all that was happening, where those around Him could not. He was pursuing the Father's will and His goal was not to be a famous pastor in Galilee; it was to be the Saviour of the World. He also knew that to do this, He would have to head for Jerusalem and all that lay in store for Him there; the 'die was cast' and He knew that He could not change the minds of those who had already decided to kill Him (9:34; 12:14).

Secondly, although the disciples still had difficulty understanding Jesus' work and ministry, they were no 'lost cause'. Their misunderstanding showed that after all Jesus had shown and taught them, their reasoning could not deliver a proper response to God's love; something more was needed. Tomorrow, we will discover what this is. After this incident, Jesus took His disciple away not just to talk with them about what God was doing, but to challenge them about what they believed (16:13-20). Jesus wanted to draw faith out of the disciples, just as His ministry had drawn faith out of some of those He had helped.

## Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of the passage
- What did the Pharisees and the Sadducees really want from Jesus?
- What does Jesus mean about reading the signs of the times?
- Why did Jesus speak about the prophet Jonah?
- Why did the disciples not understand what Jesus said to them?

### **Notes on the translation of the passage**

#### **V2,3 'It will be good weather tomorrow because the sky is red!'**

These verses about the 'red sky' warning are omitted from a significant number of ancient manuscripts of Matthew, for no reason we can easily deduce from the text itself. It has been suggested that this happened because some copyists in Egypt, where a red setting of the sun did not indicate fair weather for the next day, left it out. From their point of view, it was simply untrue! One of the most famous early centres for copying was Alexandria, in Egypt. There are some Bible versions that place these verses in brackets because of these discrepancies in the Greek, but I suggest that they are best left in, and explained in this traditional way.

#### **V8 'Why are you questioning yourselves, you of little faith, about having no bread?'**

A few translations have 'about taking no bread' at the end of the sentence, following what it says in verse 5 about the disciples forgetting to bring bread. The difference between 'taking' and 'having' is found in some of the early manuscripts, but the difference it makes to the story line is negligible.

#### **V11 'Therefore, beware of the yeast of the Pharisees ...'**

There is a connection between the previous sentences and this command of Jesus, and I have indicated this by the word 'Therefore ...'. There is a small 'particle (connecting word) in Greek to indicate this, nevertheless, some translations of the Bible omit this altogether, which makes the whole section more difficult to understand when read.

### **What did the Pharisees and the Sadducees really want from Jesus?**

It is strange to see Pharisees and Sadducees coming to see Jesus (16:1f.). They were the two main theological groups within Judaism, and they had vastly different approaches to Scripture in particular. The Pharisees believed in interpreting the first five books of the Bible (the 'Law') according to traditions accumulated over many years, written to apply the Scriptural text to everyday life. A large number of books explained God's laws, but most of them amounted to little more than their own tradition! The Sadducees, however, would not allow any 'interpretation' of the Law in Scripture at all, and for them, the first five books of the Bible were scripture alone. The 'prophets' and the 'writings' of our Old Testament today were regarded by them as works of religious interest, but not inspired scripture, as we would think of it now. In addition to this and for reasons that are too extensive to explain in this study, the Pharisees believed in the resurrection, and the Sadducees did not; this was a major disagreement between them. These two groups were at loggerheads over the interpretation of almost everything in Judaism, even though they were both well represented on the Sanhedrin, the governing body of Judaism in Jerusalem.

Only a short time ago, Pharisees came from Jerusalem to test Jesus with a question (15:1f.) and He rebuked them (15:10). It appears that the rebuff was strong enough to make the Pharisees talk with their sworn enemies, the Sadducees, who they invited to come and test Jesus. It was in both of their interests to preserve the 'status quo' of religious authority, whatever their differences. Their coming to question Jesus at the beginning of chapter 16 was the beginning of a collaboration which eventually saw Jesus condemned to

death, and handed over to the Romans for crucifixion (27:1,2). The collaboration of Pharisee and Sadducee in the death of Jesus is quite remarkable.

Here in this passage, they returned to ask Jesus the question previously asked by the Pharisees (12:28f.), and it is hard to imagine that they did this without working out what they were doing in advance. If you go back and read what Jesus said when he was first asked this by the Pharisees, you will notice that Jesus' reply strongly hinted at the reality of the resurrection. He spoke about the 'Son of Man' being 'three days and nights in the heart of the earth' before being released as Jonah was (12:40). Such language was anathema to the Sadducees, who did not believe in the resurrection! It seems likely that the Pharisees wanted the Sadducees to hear for themselves what they would think of as blasphemy.

All this may well explain why Jesus dismissed the approach of the two groups, and after He gave His reply, He simply walked away from them. As far as He was concerned, they had already heard what they needed to hear.

### ***What does Jesus mean about reading the signs of the times?***

The Pharisees and the Sadducees asked Jesus their question, but the reply they received did not suit them. What Jesus said is well known, and is about interpreting the weather for the next day according to the evening sky, as is said in places to this day 'red sky at night, shepherd's delight!' There is little symbolism in these words themselves, and it is not a parable, though some believe that Jesus was trying to say something about His coming again. This is unlikely, however, because Matthew records Jesus' words about His return later in chapter 24, where Jesus speaks extensively about this without saying anything about red skies! The focus of this part of Matthew is on Jesus' gradual change of direction away from Galilee and towards Jerusalem, and we will gain by looking at what Jesus said about this.

Jesus said these words: 'You know how to judge the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times' (16:3). His point was this; people naturally read what is happening in nature all around them with an open mind, seeking to find out what will happen next. They read the present to foretell the future. This is a natural activity, from farmers seeking to predict the weather, to people listening to each other carefully in order to anticipate their reactions. People have always done such things; it is part of life and it only works if we do it with an open mind. I would suggest that Jesus, not for the first time, perceived the game the authorities were playing, and that they came to Him with closed, not open minds. They were unable to see the consequences of their actions, and were blind, confirming the accusation Jesus had just levelled at the Pharisees (15:14).

It is worth noting that this passage of scripture is the only place where the expression 'signs of the times' is used! As I have already explained, Jesus did not use it to speak about His coming again in glory, but to describe people's general effort to read what is happening around them in order to predict the natural consequences for the future! It is probably wise therefore for us to use it in the same way, and not limit the phrase to the attempt to foretell the second coming of Christ! It may well be that we can determine something about this from what we see in the world around us, however, we must remember that Jesus did not use 'signs of the times' in this way, and also told His followers that they would never know this secret (24:36)!

### ***Why did Jesus speak about the prophet Jonah?***

There is little more we can say about the sign of the prophet Jonah that was not previously explained in the study on Matthew 12:38, which makes it clear that it refers to the death and resurrection of our Lord. However, there is one thing we can add to help us understand why Jesus may have used this reference here. At the time of Jesus, it was popularly believed that Jonah was the son of the 'widow of Zarephath' who was raised to life by the prophet Elijah (1Kings 17:17-24), and who therefore received some of Elijah's prophetic spirit! Jesus' comment about Jonah was therefore a strongly pointed criticism of the Sadducees, who did not accept that the prophetic tradition in Israel contained the 'Word of God'. The prophets were, of course, very dear to Jesus' heart (see 23:34f.)

### ***Why did the disciples not understand what Jesus said to them?***

By the time the disciples caught up with Jesus, they realised they had forgotten to bring bread (16:5). This must have caused some consternation because the disciples had just witnessed the feedings of the five (14:13-21) and the four thousand (15:32-39). On both these occasions, Jesus challenged the disciples to deal with the situation before He performed the miracle, and they had been unable to do so. So it is not surprising that the disciples feared a rebuke from the Lord about forgetting bread!

Jesus, however, was concerned about far more important things. In His mind was His altercation with the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the fact that these two factions had come together to oppose Him and place mainstream Judaism in direct opposition to God's will. This insidious development would affect His life and the lives of all His followers in future years. Had no one else noticed this? Jesus' comment to the

disciples, 'Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and the Sadducees' (16:6) was an appeal to them to look beyond their immediate interests, but they were confused because of Jesus' use of the word 'yeast'.

Jesus had already told a parable about how yeast affected the whole dough (13:33) and used it to illustrate how He wanted the disciples to 'grow' the Kingdom within the world. However, in His confrontation with the Pharisees and the Sadducees He glimpsed an evil yeast that would secretly grow and work against the Kingdom; this was the idea that 'all we need is a sign from God that meets our needs, and then we will believe'. Jesus was right; this evil yeast has negatively affected God's work in the world for two thousand years, and it is not hard to find examples of it within the life of the church today. Firstly, the Jews wanted to see Jesus perform miracles, even though He did every imaginable miracle in fulfilment of their own scripture and died in a manner described by Isaiah! They were not persuaded that he was the Messiah because He did not give them what they wanted. In the same way, people ask God to perform 'a sign' for them today, to heal a loved one or help them get a better job, for example, before they will truly believe. In truth, the faith of the true believer is faith in the work of Christ on the Cross for the redemption of sin and eternal life, not for proof that God does what we want. The evil that asks God to perform to order is insidious.

As Jesus pointed out, the Kingdom of God was about total dependency upon the provision of God, as demonstrated in the feeding of the five (14:13-21) and the four thousand (15:32-39). Further, He had only recently talked to the disciples about the fact that eating had little to do with the Kingdom (15:17-20). The disciples then realised that Jesus was not talking about physical yeast and bread. The final verse of our text (16:12) sounds a bit disparaging to the disciples, but it does at least indicate that they understood what Jesus was saying.

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## Discipleship

### Application

There are some important lessons for us from these scriptures. Firstly, we need to be focussed on what God requires of us for the Kingdom of God, and not be dependent for our faith on what we think God will do for us. It is strange that after people have become Christians and accepted that Christ has saved their very souls, many people will later drift away from faith if things do not go their way in life! This is purely the work of the devil, who has used this tactic throughout the centuries, from before the days of the Pharisees and the Sadducees! Miracles and signs are an important part of the life of God's people, but they are God's demonstration of His power and glory, and He uses them to bring people into His Kingdom rather than merely to keep us going in a life that we, of all people, should understand to be mortal.

One other feature of the text is Jesus' assumption that people are able to read what is happening around them and perceive something of the future. We all do this to some extent, and few people will not join in a debate that tries to predict the money markets or the political future of a government, or the price of fuel, for example! In the same way, Jesus invites us to look at the world around us, see what is happening, and interpret it according to our understanding of His Word. Today, we can look at the devastation of our planet and perceive that not only do we have to spend massive scientific and technological effort to attempt to rectify the impact of industry on the planet, but we must also perceive what God is saying to us through all this. Have we become 'too big for our boots' and forgotten the moral nature of the world in which we live? Do we need to rediscover a mentality of servitude rather than mastery of the world, in science, engineering, technology, service industries and banking, as well as in the life of the church!

There is always more for us to discover when we delve into Scripture, but we do need to read it carefully in order to get to the truth.

### Questions for groups

1. In the light of this study, what 'signs of the times' can we read today which point to the Kingdom of God?
2. If you were asked to sum up the work of Christ in one Old Testament prophet, would you expect it to be Jonah? If not, who?
3. Give some examples of where the 'yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees is at work today.

### Discipleship challenges

- *Fast and pray as suits you best to give time to listening to the Lord. Listen actively, by reading the Bible, perhaps some Psalms, or reading some Christian biography, or simply waiting. It will be fruitful!*
  - *If you are married or have a close friend, do the same exercise with this other person, if possible. It can be very revealing and helpful to share such experiences and check out with each other what the Lord is saying to you either individually or together.*
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## **Final Prayer**

Jesus Christ, give us that joy which comes from You alone. Joy which lifts our hearts, opens us up to give and receive from others, heals us from all manner of problems and diseases, empowers us to do things we had not perceived, and brings us alive in You. Jesus Christ, give us joy; again and again! AMEN

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