

Prayers

Opening prayer

Glory be to You, Lord of all. You chose Your people Israel to be Yours, and now through Jesus Christ You have given the privileges of being Your children to all who respond to You by faith! Come, into our lives and hearts, Holy Spirit, and give us new hearts, new vigour, new trust and new faith. May we so love You that we never cease to do Your will; through Jesus Christ our Lord; AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

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

Do you take a regular magazine with feature articles about news in general? If so, then look at what is of interest and use this as a source for prayer. The Holy Spirit will interpret these articles to you and guide you in how you should pray.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for those who lead worship in your church.** *Pray for those who are responsible for leading the music and worship in your church. Today, they probably have a higher profile than ever before*
- *Pray today for people who are not able to express their faith in our own country, because of persecution.*
- *Give thanks to God for all the love you have received from others. Bring these things before the Lord and bring those who have loved you before the Lord. May true love inspire greatness within your soul.*

Meditation

Dear God, bring peace to me;
The noises of the world have drowned the voice of love;
And now I need Your quiet.

You heal in inner stillness;
By caring thoughtfulness and love, all unconditional;
You tend me perfectly.

And now I sense Your touch,
The ever patient tending of my open wounds and scars;
I feel Your real forgiveness.

This yielding of my soul
Brings life-affirming health and hope for all my future,
In opening every doorway.

And I will ever serve
The One who knows me more than I will ever know
Who cures my soul for life.

Bible Study

Bible passage – Matthew 16:21-23

²¹ From that time onwards, Jesus Christ began to show his disciples that it was necessary for him to go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.

²² Then Peter caught his attention and spoke strongly to him, saying,

'God forbid, Lord! This must never happen to you.'

²³ Jesus turned and said to Peter,

'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you do not have in mind the ways of God, but of people.'

Review

Coming after the famous Caesarea Philippi incident (16:13-20), this passage describes what happened when Jesus began to speak to the disciples about the next phase of His ministry, in which He would go to Jerusalem. It is referred to as Jesus' first prediction of His death, and there are two other predictions (Matt 17:22,23, and 20:17-19). Jesus told His disciples that He would be arrested and handed over to the authorities to be killed (16:21), and more than that, He told them equally plainly that He would be raised from the dead 'on the third day!' Jesus had been attempting to speak privately with the disciples for some time, and He had even given them clues about what He would say by telling them about 'the sign of the prophet Jonah' who was three days and nights in the belly of the whale' (12:40, 16:4). Now we know why He had done this! Unfortunately, Peter was not able to put everything together and completely misunderstood Jesus (16:22,23).

Most Christians know this story very well, but we must try and place ourselves in the shoes of those for whom this message of Jesus was quite unbelievable, and utterly beyond their comprehension. Peter must have been deeply confused, with this message coming just after the Caesarea incident when he was buoyed by the commendation he received for testifying that Jesus was the Christ. He was therefore emboldened to challenge Jesus (16:22), with dire consequences.

All of us know what it is like to have highs and lows, very often happening close to each other and playing havoc with our sense of purpose in life and our self esteem. This was clearly one of Peter's lowest points. He simply misread all that was happening and failed to grasp the connection between Jesus the Messiah, and the suffering that lay ahead of Him. He was unable to accept what Jesus told him because it did not fit with his own idea of what should happen next, and what Jesus said about His death bore no resemblance to the generally accepted notion that the Messiah would come to Jerusalem in glory! All of us who follow Jesus must stand with Peter at this point and accept that our own feelings too often stand in the way of what the Lord requires; so we must be prepared to hear Jesus' rebuke, as well as His praise!

The result of all this was that Jesus rebuked Peter with words we find hard to hear, 'Get behind me Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you do not have in mind the ways of God, but of people.' Jesus said these words while looking directly at Peter (16:23). It is unlikely that Jesus was personally addressing Peter as 'Satan', the man to whom He had just given the keys of the kingdom. Peter had drawn Jesus to one side, and the Gospel of Mark says clearly that this is indeed what happened (Mark 8:32). Jesus saw that Satan was using Peter to prevent Him getting His message to the other disciples, and He had to put a stop to Satan's use of Peter. Satan always opposes the work of God, He needs to be identified and dismissed, as Jesus' words and actions demonstrate.

We must reflect that Peter had to stand there and receive these words from Jesus. We do not know how he managed to do this, but he did not have the option of rejecting what Jesus said, or just turning away. Jesus was speaking to him directly. We can argue as much as we like about whether it was right for Jesus to identify Satan with Peter in this way, but He did, and Peter had to receive it as a rebuke; moreover, he had to get over it and move on. There is no evidence to say that after this, Peter was any less of a leader than before, and it is more likely that he was chastised and renewed. Certainly, we meet Peter going up the Mount of Transfiguration in the next episode in Matthew's Gospel (17:1-8), still the leader of the disciples, and having composed himself after this extraordinary incident.

Going Deeper

- Notes on the text and translation
- Why is Jesus called 'the Christ' in verse 21?
- Did anyone really understand when Jesus spoke about His death?
- Why did Peter disagree with Jesus, and what could Jesus do about this?

Notes on the text and translation

V21 'Jesus Christ'

I have added the name 'Christ' to Jesus because there is a small amount of evidence from the early manuscripts that this could have been in the original. Most Bible versions simply have 'Jesus' at this

point, but it makes sense in the light of the preceding section of narrative to include 'Christ' here (meaning 'Messiah').

The evidence about this text is complex, but can be summarised in this way. The oldest complete manuscript of the Greek New Testament we possess is the fourth century 'Codex Sinaiticus' discovered in an Egyptian monastery on Mount Sinai. Enigmatically, the text reads 'Jesus Christ', but a copy checker has written on the text that these words were a mistake and should be omitted. A second copy checker has written in the margin that it should read just 'Jesus'. Most Bibles follow this last copy checker, but I have decided to use the text as Codex Sinaiticus has it originally.

Why is Jesus called 'the Christ' in verse 21?

It is very obvious that verse 21 is important, as it begins with words that are virtually the same as those used by Matthew for the beginning of Jesus' ministry; 'From that time, Jesus began to ...' (see Matt 4:17). These are the only two places in Matthew's Gospel where this phrase is used. The first of these indicates the beginning of Jesus' public ministry (4:17), and the second (16:21) indicates the second half of Jesus' ministry which is more exclusively, but not totally, focussed upon teaching the twelve disciples and heading to Jerusalem.

You will notice from the notes above that I have translated verse 21 using the name 'Jesus Christ'. I believe this verse is pivotal for the whole of Matthew Gospel. Jesus is called 'Christ' only rarely in Matthew, at the beginning (1:11,17,18) and towards the end (27:17,22). In the first place, Jesus is given His title as part of the genealogy. In the last, the words are ironically on the lips of the Roman (Gentile) Pilate as he tried to persuade the Jews to release Jesus just before His death. In chapter 16, Peter confessed Jesus to be 'the Christ (the same word as the Greek 'Messiah'), the Son of the Living God' (16:16), and it seems right both to the passage itself, and to the central position of the text in the Gospel, that Jesus should here, in this later verse (21), be called 'Christ'.

These matters are worth our attention, as the words we use convey a great deal about us, and words, in this case, convey the care with which we name our Lord and identify to others who he is. He is the man Jesus, who is the Christ ('Messiah'). The rest of the verse goes on to say what kind of Messiah He is, because He was not the kind of Messiah that was expected, as Peter found out to his cost!

Did anyone really understand when Jesus spoke about His death?

It is easy for us to be mildly dismissive of the people of Jesus' day, who believed that the Messiah would come to be a King 'like David', fulfilling the law, vindicating the long-suffering people of God, and liberating them from their enemies. This idea was a mixture of two things; firstly, the popular need for a good king and for military liberation from enemies; secondly, the rigorous legalism of the religious authorities who taught 'the Law' to them Sabbath by Sabbath in the synagogues. Unfortunately, this all paid scant attention to vast tracts of Old Testament scriptures at their disposal but which were not expounded by their religious leaders and teachers. Jesus had already preached that He would fulfil the Law Himself, and drummed home his interpretation of the 'Law' in the great 'Sermon on the Mount'. In this great teaching, He interpreted God's laws according to the 'Prophetic' literature of the Old Testament, and He did the same when telling the disciples about the things that would happen to the Messiah in our passage today.

When Jesus began to 'show' or 'enlighten' the disciples about what was going to happen to Him (16:21), he did not speak about the suffering, death or resurrection of the Messiah as if it was some kind of new teaching. The way of suffering was prefigured in the Old Testament by great books such as Job; it was indicated in the Psalms, the Hymn Book of God's people (e.g. 16:10-11; 34:19; 118:22), and it was prophesied by the prophets. Jeremiah demonstrated this in his life (see ch. 26-31), and Isaiah spoke about it in his great 'suffering servant' poems (see ch. 40f. especially 52:13-15; 53:10-12), and the same theme is found in other literature not included in our Bibles such as the 'Wisdom of Solomon' and 'Maccabees'. When the Pharisees taught, they taught from the books of the law, the first five books of the Bible, and when Jesus taught, he used the Prophets to explain the Law and God's Word. The result of all this was that Jesus knew that His destiny was to suffer and to die, but He wanted other people to know the truth about what the Bible says concerning the Messiah.

Jesus not only spoke of suffering of course, but he finished with saying that He would 'be raised' and therefore vindicated by God Himself. Not that He would 'rise', but that He would 'be raised'; in other words, the resurrection was something that God would do to Him and for Him, therefore bringing glory to the Father. He had already spoken of this, when He talked of the bridegroom being taken away at the wedding feast (9:15), and of the sign of the prophet Jonah (12:40). Had anyone really heard what He was saying when He taught in this way? It was clear that the path by which all this would happen would take some time to unfold.

Why did Peter disagree with Jesus, and what could Jesus do about this?

Despite all that Jesus had taught, Peter was still dominated by what was already inside his mind, the things he had been taught from childhood about the Messiah. For this reason, he was therefore firmly resistant to the path of suffering of which Jesus spoke. Catching Jesus' attention to speak to him directly, Peter chastised Jesus with words, which, using a Greek idiom, mean something like 'God forgive you for suggesting such a thing!' Now, this was the reason why previously (16:20) Jesus had strongly told the disciples and others that they should not speak openly about Him or the Kingdom (16:20; 9:30). They had not yet grasped its fundamental truths! Imagine what the situation would be if Jesus' disciples had told people, even on mission, the details of their own understanding of the Messiah! They would not have been able to tell them the truth! Fortunately, when the disciples went on mission earlier, Jesus gave them precise instructions about what to preach and what to do (ch. 10).

Now Jesus had to respond to the man to whom, only a few moments ago, He had given the Keys of the Kingdom, and blessed as the 'rock' of the Church of God (16:18-20). Peter was holding out to Jesus the temptation to find an easier way than God's way to be Messiah, and for Jesus, it was the same temptation as that brought by the Devil in the wilderness (4:1-11). Jesus was forced to respond in the same way, and, turning to address the disciples as well as Peter, He dismissed His enemy Satan who had presented himself through the leader of the disciples.

Peter, who had just received God's revelation was now dominated by the 'ways ... of the world'; the rock upon which the Church was to be built had now become a stumbling stone (in Greek, a 'skandalos', or scandal; see in the Old Testament, Isaiah 8:14), and the one who was blessed had been used by Satan! Here is a lesson that there is nothing automatic in the way that God's plans work in people. God will fulfil His purposes, but even the best of people, like Peter, are capable of failing dramatically. It is a lesson that should stay with every Christian leader who seeks to emulate the leadership of Peter; those who oppose the will of God, for whatever reason that may seem good in this world, do the work of God's enemy, Satan. Yet it is also a warning to every Christian not to take their eyes away from the path to the Cross of their Saviour.

Discipleship

Application

In the desperate search by churches to overcome the downturn in membership, many have for a good number of years presented a Gospel that appears to promote the Gospel as happy, fulfilling, and attractive. How worldly this seems when we read a passage of scripture like this! It is essential to the Gospel for people to know that we are called to a path of suffering, following the life of our Saviour. The only way for the Church to be faithful is to preach the whole Gospel of Jesus Christ which includes his dreadful walk to the Cross as well as the victorious resurrection. In that way we can enable the many people who come to church who suffer, to feel that their Saviour knows the path of human distress and pain. Furthermore, He knows a way through the problems of today to the victory of love over evil in this life as well as the next. If such a real Gospel was preached, then it may help to prevent large numbers of people from leaving the church because they cannot equate the Jesus they have heard about from the pulpit, with the painful circumstances of their own lives.

Jesus walked the way of the Cross for our benefit, and for our Salvation. Peter did not understand this mystery, and one is tempted to wonder how many people really do. It was God's way, not our way, and we are ever in awe that Jesus was prepared to do this for us. We will learn much more about it in the days ahead.

Questions for groups

1. For what reasons do you think that Jesus had to die, to save people and restore their relationship with God?
2. On reflection, have you ever stood against what you have later discovered to be God's will? It is a normal part of discipleship!
3. How would you have responded had you been Peter in this story? Would you have left the disciples group? At least to come to terms with it all?

Discipleship challenges

- *In what ways do we make presumptions about the will of God today because of our culture? Ask yourself whether you need to do more listening to God than trying to do His will, and pray about how you can find the time to really listen.*
 - *The sign of the suffering of Christ is the Cross. What attitudes to people today have towards the 'symbol' of the cross? Do some research and ask people of all kinds, in normal conversation, what they think the cross means – particularly if they are wearing it!*
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Final Prayer

Bring me close to You through what I do this day, Lord Jesus. May I understand the things that You would have me do, and so do them. May I take hold of each challenge You bring me, and not avoid them. May I embrace a right attitude to all things, and take joy in being Your servant; through Your Name I pray, AMEN
