

## Prayers

### To God

*Weekly Theme: The Wisdom of God*

*Submit in your spirit to the wisdom of God; let go of anything you feel deeply about and listen to what Your Lord would say to you.*

### For myself

Jesus, bless my soul this day, and lift it from the realms of 'normal' to perceive and see Your Kingdom here, alive and well. Jesus, strengthen me to do Your will, I pray, as part of all that builds Your Kingdom here on earth. Jesus, turn my life completely inside out, so I may do the work before me as for You and for Your Kingdom. AMEN

### For others

*Pray for those competing in the Paralympic games. Pray that the world will accept the spirit and endeavour of those whose lives are limited through no fault of their own.*

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## Meditation

Wake up, my soul, wake up again,  
And see the eternal consequences of your sinful actions:

See the sin that lies entrenched within,  
Wake up to all God's grace, full of faith and mercy:

See the hints of favouritism in your attitudes,  
Wake up to all God's love, unprejudiced and impartial:

See the trace of laziness that holds you back,  
Wake up to all God's urging and His strength, all-powerful:

See the squandered time you hide away,  
Wake up to all God's faithful waiting for your penitence:

See the little compromises leading you to hell,  
Wake up to all God's urgent signposts to His heaven:

See the easy way of wandering where you want,  
Wake up to all God's leading towards His narrow way:

Wake up, my soul, wake up again  
And use the offer of salvation put before you, yes, today.

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## Bible Passage

### Luke 13:1-9

<sup>1</sup> Now at that time there were some people around who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. <sup>2</sup> Jesus answered,

***“So you think that because they suffered like this, these Galileans were worse sinners than anyone else in Galilee? <sup>3</sup> No, I tell you! And unless you repent, all of you will perish as they did. <sup>4</sup> What then of the eighteen people who died when the tower fell on them at Siloam? You think they were more guilty than everyone else living in Jerusalem? <sup>5</sup> No, I tell you! And unless you repent, all of you will perish as they did!”***

<sup>6</sup> Then he told this parable:

***“A man had a fig-tree planted in his vineyard, and when he went to look for fruit on it, he did not find any. <sup>7</sup> So he said to the man who looked after the vineyard,***

***‘For three years now I have come to look for fruit on this fig-tree and have not found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil? <sup>8</sup> But the man replied, “leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig round it and fertilise it. <sup>9</sup> If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.”***

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## Review

After a series of healings and stories of Jesus' teaching (Luke 12), we suddenly find ourselves reading Luke's strange and exclusive report about people who had been killed in Jerusalem! What is this about, and why does Luke report it?

The incidents themselves are shocking (13:2-5). Pontius Pilate had apparently killed some Jews while they were performing sacrifices (13:1), and in another recent and tragic incident, a building had collapsed on some people (13:4). These events were awful enough, but Jesus seems concerned about the attitudes people had towards those who had died. They assumed that God judged those caught up in these tragic events, but Jesus saw them as a warning to God's people to repent (13:3,5). All this leads Jesus to teach the disciples using a parable about a man and his vineyard; it is a dramatic story with many implications and a message about the patient mercy of God (13:6-9).

All of this happens as Jesus and His disciples begin to journey towards Jerusalem, knowing that this was the destiny of God's Messiah (9:18f.). In comparison to the earlier ministry of Jesus, things were getting rather contentious, and Jesus was continuing to teach the disciples (12:1f.). He was also challenging the religious authorities (12:37f.), and it is not surprising therefore that some began to ask themselves what might happen when Jesus arrived at their capital city. This may well have been the reason why Jesus was told about an ugly incident that had recently happened in Jerusalem (13:1). Some may have been concerned that Pilate would do to Jesus what he had done to plenty of others who were perceived to be a threat to the peace of the city, and who had been slaughtered without

mercy or dignity. And, horror of horrors, people had been killed while making their sacrifices in the Temple, *'Pilate had mixed (their blood) with their sacrifices (13:1f.)*.

There is no official description of the incident in court records or the Bible, but the most likely scenario for this is that the slaughter happened at Passover. This was a time of religious and national zeal in Jerusalem, when Pilate had to come to the city from his countryside home to ensure law and order, and he used extreme force. Any hint of insurrection was put down, and court records suggest that incidents took place almost every year. Now the Jews deeply resented the Roman presence in Jerusalem, but they also believed deeply that God was on their side and would ultimately lead them to victory. So it would have been natural for them to assume that those who died without defeating Rome were sinners who had not done God's will! Moreover, because of their failure, people were still awaiting the Messiah!

Jesus would have nothing to do this; to Him, such attitudes represented a wrong picture of the Messiah and they were judgemental to those who had died; it was all too easy to 'point the finger' at the poor misfortunates. So Jesus urged those with Him to repent and turn to God (13:3). Throughout His ministry, Jesus taught that people were responsible for their own actions, and the only way to avoid death and separation from God was to turn to Him.

Jesus added further force to His call to repentance by referring to another incident. Apparently, eighteen people had died after a building collapsed near the Jerusalem water system at Siloam (13:4f.). Now the popular understanding of such a tragedy was that those who died must have sinned and therefore deserved divine retribution, but Jesus challenged this 'finger-wagging' attitude towards sin and suffering. He wanted people to recognise their own sin and deal with it properly; so he repeated, *'unless you repent, all of you will perish!*' (13:5). So here, Jesus wholly rejects the idea that suffering denotes punishment for wrongdoing, or the idea that suffering is something God uses to judge people. He calls on us to accept that our own sins will lead to judgement and to refrain from making assumptions about the sins of others. These are spiritual lessons we do well to learn in every generation.

In His own mind, Jesus still had more to say, however, and He went on to tell a parable, one of many he told about a man who planted a vineyard (13:6-9). Why did Jesus speak about a fig tree in a vineyard, which failed to bear fruit? What does it mean for the man who looks after the vineyard to tend the fig tree for a further year while judgement is delayed? There are a number of possibilities. Jesus could be saying something about the coming of God's Messiah, and also about the delay in His second coming. He could also be highlighting the fruitlessness of Israel (the fig tree) and perhaps the ultimate rejection of Israel. The parable also says some important things about the importance of God's judgement and 'bearing fruit'.

Perhaps the best way to interpret the parable is this. God is the man with a vineyard and the fig tree, and the fig tree, perhaps the vineyard as well, represents Israel. God comes looking for fruit, and His search constitutes the 'harvest' and the coming 'judgement'. It is God who says to the man who is looking after the vineyard (Jesus) that the fig tree should be cut down because of unfruitfulness, and Jesus calls for God's mercy; *'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilise it ...'* (13:8). This fits with the many occasions in the Gospels where Jesus appears to be very reluctant to accept the fruitlessness of Israel, and pleads with God for His people, the people of Israel (see 13:34,35, 19:41-44).

All in all, we have here a plain message of Jesus about the need for personal repentance and the merciful delay of the Father that allows time for this repentance. Jesus therefore demonstrates that as He goes to Jerusalem, He returns to the basic Gospel message which characterised the beginning of His ministry, in which He proclaimed God's Kingdom and the need for repentance. The Jews were prone to avoid the personal implications of God's Word by making grand assumptions about His work and the nature of redemption; they believed they were saved merely by being 'good', and being the children of Abraham. Everything within our passage today points us now towards a different kind of faith in which a personal relationship with God is the key. So although this is familiar to us now as the 'Good news of

God', the Gospel, we cannot avoid its radical message. God calls us to repent and gives us time to do this; so we had better see to it that we respond!

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## Going Deeper

### Notes on the text and translation

**V1** *'at that time there were some people around who told Jesus'*

Other translations:

*'there were some people present at that time who told Jesus'* (NIV)

*'Now on the same occasion there were some present who reported to Him'* (NAS)

I highlight this sentence because the Greek word used for the verb 'to tell' means specifically 'to announce' or 'to inform'. It seems that some decided to test Jesus by seeing what His response would be to these events, of which He may have been unfamiliar. They were asking Jesus to consider what lay ahead of Him in Jerusalem.

**V3,5** *'No, I tell you! And unless you repent, all of you will perish as they did!'*

Other translations:

*'I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish'* (NIV)

*'No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will perish too'* (NRSV)

Most of the differences here are incidental, but the very last words in my translation are designed to be helpful. The last phrase in the Greek says this; 'all will likewise perish', and each translator attempts to convey the idea of 'likewise' in a helpful way. However, I do not think that the English word 'too' as in 'you will perish too' (NRSV) is adequate. The phrase 'you will perish as they did', connects better with the sentence and the story as a whole.

**V7** *'the man who looked after the vineyard'*

Other translations:

*'the man who took care of the vineyard'* (NIV)

*'the gardener'* (NRSV)

The Greek word used here means 'vinedresser', that is, someone who is expert in tending vines. There is a tension here between the idea of the vine and the vinedresser and the fig tree which is the subject of the parable; the vinedresser becomes involved with the consequences of the fruitlessness of the fig tree. See study for whether this is of significance.

### Further Comments

#### **Blood ... mixed with sacrifices**

This is an enigmatic phrase, because the notion of blood spilt was of crucial importance to the Jewish people. Spilt blood was sacrificial blood, and there is just a hint here that the loss

of life when Pilate slaughtered people in Jerusalem was considered by some to be sacrificial. Were some people considered sacrificed for the good of all? Did the people making their sacrifices die because they sinned against God or against human authority? There is plenty of scope for intrigue. But no wonder Jesus said 'No' to all such interpretations and turned the attention back to the individual.

### ***Trouble in Jerusalem***

It is fair to say that whilst there are no specific reports of Pilate killing people in Jerusalem while performing their sacrifices, such an incident would be generally characteristic of Pilate's time as governor of Judea. Certainly he would not have been bothered whether the people he killed were sacrificing or not. He was only concerned to send out messages that the people should accept the rule of Roman law.

There is a hint in this passage of Jesus not simply acknowledging the awful events brought to His attention, but also looking forward to trouble ahead. Within thirty years of Jesus' death, Jerusalem would be sacked by the Roman authorities (AD66-70), and this whole event would soon be regarded by the Christian church as the ultimate judgement on the Jewish people for their rejection of the Christ.

Still, Jesus' words direct people not to become consumed by hypothesising about the fate of others, and be concerned moreover about their own destiny.

### ***Parables about vineyards in Scripture***

In general, the vineyard is a picture of the people of Israel. The classic prophetic vision encapsulating this is found in Isaiah 5, which describes the Lord God making a vineyard and expecting wonderful fruit, but finding none. It seems that in a number of parables, Jesus built on this great Old Testament theme.

Jesus' first parable about a vineyard is the parable of the workers in the vineyard, in which Jesus describes the mercy of God in rewarding people out of His generosity, indeed, a generosity that was almost scandalous by human standards (Matthew 20:1-16).

Jesus' second parable about a vineyard is found towards the end of His ministry, and it is the parable of the jealous stewards who murder the son of the vineyard owner (Matthew 21:28-44, Mark 12:1-9, Luke 20:9-18). This is an important parable and is found in three Gospels.

The other major Gospel passage concerning vines or vineyards is John's great description of Jesus' last prayer before He died, in which He describes Himself as the 'Vine' and His disciples as the 'branches' (John 15). There is much more to this passage, but it is impossible to understand it properly unless we have tracked the theme of the vineyard within Scripture, including Old Testament prophecies and New Testament parables on the same theme.

All these parables have an 'end times' feel, and are close to ideas about God's final 'Judgement' and associated themes such as the need for repentance.

### ***Jesus' reluctance to condemn Israel.***

Toward the end of this chapter of Luke, we read of Jesus own concern about Israel. He says these words:

*<sup>34</sup> "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! <sup>35</sup> Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'"*

The issue of what happens to the Jewish people is never wholly resolved in Scripture, except to say that despite their rejection of the Messiah, hope is always held out for the eventual salvation of God's Old testament people. This is nowhere more eloquently set out than in Paul's letter to the Romans, especially in chapter 11.

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## **Discipleship**

### ***Application***

#### ***Dealing with tragedies***

For people in general, it is perhaps when they must deal with tragedies that they find themselves falling back on basic beliefs which prop them up. For example, people who do not otherwise show any faith in God believe that when their loved ones die they 'go to heaven', and are looked after by God, and they believe this without any thought of the Gospel, or of justice, or the love and mercy of God. We must learn from this, for if we have never thought deeply about what happens when people die, or how to interpret the worst of human tragedy, then we will be doomed to fall back on the little we know, and hope it will serve us. But too often, it does not, especially if we have not spent time with God's Word, the Bible.

In this passage, Jesus was told about a tragedy and had to try and re-direct people's natural thoughts about what happened and about why people died, in order to make them face the truth about God and their eternal destiny. I believe that Jesus would do the same to us even now. When tragedy strikes, our place is not to judge others caught up in such difficulty, whether they live or die. Our personal response must be to hear what our Lord would say to us through the suffering experiences of life we observe, and react with faith. In the end, we are responsible for our own destiny, because we alone can be ready to repent and turn ourselves around to God's direction.

#### ***Repentance***

Jesus' words here are addressed to people who were supposed to understand what it meant to repent, but they did not. When Jesus called people to repent, the 'tense' of the word He used suggests that He thought people should continuously repent, turning to God over and over again, to account for the battles of real life.

I suggest that the true Christian disciple is one who is constantly ready to stand down from his or her own opinions and attitudes and repent, that is, to accept being wrong. This is not to adapt a 'victim spirit', which is characterised by a personal need to be 'put down'. Rather, it is to accept the fundamentally flawed nature of the human soul, even the saved human soul while still living here on earth, and turn away from sin for the good of self and the good of all. People who stand on their own opinions are always the most dangerous in the church.

### ***Ideas for what to do***

- Look back over the last year and think of the various tragedies that have occurred whether in the life of the world, or in the life of your church. How have people responded to these tragedies, and what do they think God has to do with them, if anything? Look at this carefully, for it will reveal people's 'natural' thoughts about God which are sometimes at odds with the truth about Him as revealed in the Bible.

- If God is merciful, are we to be merciful, and how should we go about doing this? Think carefully about this and try to formulate a plan to be merciful in your dealings especially those you find difficult.

### **Questions (for use in groups)**

1. How is sin linked with suffering, and what does this passage tell us about this link, if anything?
2. To what extent can we preach a message of repentance today if we include the threat that those who do not repent will die? If this is the truth, why should we not preach it?
3. If God has spared the fig tree for a year, as in this parable, what does this mean? Has Israel been given extra time to repent? Are we given extra time to repent? What is the mercy of God to which this passage speaks?

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## **Final Prayer**

Lord God Almighty, make me spiritually sensitive to Your leading. May I never fail to spot the movement of Your Spirit as it blows around my soul; may I never fail to hear Your voice as it speaks to me through the day; may I never fail to see Your wonders as I look upon Your world. I long to be Your useful servant who is fully and productively engaged in Your world, Lord God Almighty. Receive my prayer and make me worthy I pray. AMEN

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