

## Prayers

### **To God**

*Dwell on the fact that Jesus went to Jerusalem knowing what would happen to Him, and give thanks for His self sacrifice.*

### **For Self**

*At this Easter time, ask yourself whether you would have done better than the disciples, faced with all Jesus was saying and doing before His death (see John 13-17). Offer yourself to Your Lord, who calls you just as He has called others to do His will.*

### **For others**

**Father God, we wonder why there is so much evil around, why men and women kill each other, and why children suffer evils like FGM or sex trafficking. Come and save us Lord Jesus, especially those whose lives are scarred by such evil. Through the power of Your Good News, may people choose the good and reject the evil before them. AMEN**

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## Meditation

Before He died,  
Jesus shared Himself in bread and wine.

The first disciples did not know  
That this simple act would become a feast;  
Enjoining all who love the one who died for them  
To celebrate their Lord and Christ.

From east to west and north to south  
From past and present, now until eternity,  
Those who know that Christ has died  
Now share this simple miracle of love.

So when you take the bread,  
Who do you take into yourself? Whose life?  
So when you drink the wine,  
Whose blood has soaked away to give you life?

Father, forgive; dear Jesus, save ...  
For we do not know what we are doing ...  
But by doing what He asks of us, we give ourselves  
To Him who gave Himself for all.

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## Bible Passage

## **Matthew 27:38-44**

<sup>38</sup> Two outlaws were crucified with him, one on his right, and one on his left. <sup>39</sup> Those who passed by jeered at him, shaking their heads <sup>40</sup> saying,

*'So, you would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself then! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God.'*

<sup>41</sup> The chief priests, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him in the same way, saying,

*<sup>42</sup> 'He saved others; doesn't he have the power to save himself? He is the King of Israel, let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. <sup>43</sup> He trusts in God; let God save him now, if he wants to; for he said,*

***"I am God's Son."***

<sup>44</sup> The outlaws who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way.

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## **Review**

Matthew describes the unthinkable; Jesus is led out to Calvary and crucified and it is intolerably hard to contemplate. Perhaps we realise this most when we are forced, as Matthew does, to dwell on the awful suspense of this death. Along with others, Jesus had been hoisted on a cross with unbelievable barbarism, and will hang there until the certain end.

Most of us either have or will experience the pain and suspense of waiting for someone to die. Everything has been done and said and we wait, for no one can presume to know God's timing for death. The usual elements of life are stripped away and we are left with the awful facts before us; we wait, watch and listen, unsure of how to respond. So it was for those who saw Jesus' death, and from their personal experience comes Matthew's description which we read. The outlaws, the crowds, the religious authorities and the charge written above His head, all confirm the tragic, final rejection of the Messiah by the world He came to save.

### ***The two outlaws***

Matthew reports that two outlaws were crucified next to Jesus (27:38). Tradition presents these two as thieves, which ironically reminds us of when Jesus was arrested in Gethsemane, '*as though he were a thief*' (26:55). However, Matthew's word for them is one used for political insurrectionists, or 'outlaws'. So Jesus was killed between two people representing the kind of leadership Jesus spent his whole life repudiating, for the zealots wanted a Messiah who would throw the Romans out of Israel. Luke tells us that one of them derides Jesus (Luke 23:39), whilst the other perceives the injustice of Jesus' death (Luke 23:40-43). Matthew merely reports their taunts (27:44), representing the world's rejection.

We may remember that the disciples had asked to be at Jesus' right and left hand side (20:20-23), but this was not the glory they had in mind, or were yet willing to accept; so they did not accompany Jesus on the Cross, the two 'outlaws' did. We are reminded of Isaiah's suffering servant (53:12) '*he was numbered with the transgressors*', and we are shocked to read of Jesus being treated in this way, but this is God's purpose for His Servant, and Jesus is obedient to the great plan of God for the Salvation of humanity. We are amazed, and wonder at the qualities of the Man who could do this for us.

## ***Those who pass by***

The crowd then hurls their rejection at Jesus without empathy; they seek to ridicule life's 'losers', and from their point of view, the dying Jesus was a loser. Their jaunts reflect what Jesus had said and taught in recent days, and it seems Jesus' comments about the Temple had touched a nerve, so they throw His comments back at Him (27:40). Individually, they had probably heard Jesus speak second or third hand about tearing the Temple down and building it in three days. Now the Temple had been built only recently and all Jews had given time and money to get it built; they did not take kindly to Jesus' prophecy of its destruction. They were so far from the truth of what Jesus really said, there was little hope that Jesus' Messianic mission would be understood.

Their final cut would seem to sting the most; '*come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God*' (27:40). Would the man who raised the dead now show the ultimate proof of His power? They certainly did not think so (27:40). It is doubtful that those who 'passed by' on the road out of Jerusalem could connect what they were saying with the words of Psalm 22 (27:7) which they all doubtless knew from their Temple worship; '*all who see me mock at me, they make mouths at me, they shake their heads ...*' (and also Lamentations 2:15). They could not know their own ignorance would soon be trumped, but they said it to tear at Jesus' mortally injured heart, and He knew it.

## ***If you are the Son of God ...***

In the Praetorium, Jesus had been subject to a 'mock' coronation, with crown, robe, and sceptre, and the public humiliation He received was the opposite of the public acclamation that a King might expect upon coronation. Rather, the very words 'if you are the son of God' echo the temptations of Satan in the wilderness (4:3,6) in which Jesus was presented with the idea that He could exploit His privileged status. While Jesus was impaled upon the cross, it was indeed possible for Him to come down; but the power of Jesus was shown in His mastery of both Himself and the will of God in the Garden of Gethsemane. It was there that the key battle was finally won and all possibility of a fracture between God's will and Jesus' actions were finally put to rest. Jesus would stay on the cross.

## ***The mockery of the chief priests***

The chief priests, scribes and elders continued to mock Jesus '*in the same way*' (27:41). They all placed Jesus on the cross by their lust for control and their envy and religious jealousy, but now they stand in front of Jesus talking about Him, but not to Him, an insult in itself. In all this the chief priests and elders were joined by the 'scribes' (27:41), the biblical scholars of the day who largely kept themselves clear of political intrigue, but were happy to see this challenge to their authority come to an end. They mocked; '*He saved others, doesn't He have the power to save Himself?...*' (27:42).

The irony of everything they said about Jesus was palpable. They appeared to recognise that the man being crucified has indeed saved others (27:42) and thought that they were the masters of irony by laughing at Him with their ridicule, challenging Him to use His power to save Himself. But the irony was on them; they did not understand that it was precisely by NOT saving Himself that He was indeed now saving others. Neither did they seem bothered that by killing Jesus they were preventing this man from further healing others in their own midst! What an insult it was to the many He had healed as well as the people who knew Jesus.

## ***'Let God save Him now!' (27:43)***

The final insult hurled at Jesus was the implication that God has abandoned Him. The document called 'Wisdom of Solomon', well known in Jesus' day, speaks of plots made by the wicked against a 'poor and honest man', culminating in this telling statement; *'If the just man is God's son, God will stretch out His hand to him and save him from the clutches of his enemies'* (2:19,20). This comes itself from Psalm 22:8 *'Commit your cause to the Lord; let him deliver -- let him rescue the one in whom he delights!'*

So the chief priests and others were reflecting Biblical prophecy in saying *'He trusts in God, let God save Him now, if He wants to ...'* but they were quoting the Wisdom of Solomon in mockery and did not realise how they were in effect mocking God's Word and His promises. God would deliver Jesus, but not in a way they could understand. Like many then and since, they had a knowledge of literature but an ignorance of scripture.

The last irony is that they shout out *'He said, "I am God's Son"*, something Jesus never said about Himself, though throughout His ministry people said this about Him, starting with Peter (16:16) and ending with Caiaphas (26:63,64). There is a symbolic victory at this point as it becomes clear that the chief priests, scribes and elders recognise that this is what people commonly believe about Jesus, and it happens to be true.

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## Application

### ***Discipleship issues***

#### ***Jesus endures human mockery***

The Cross of Jesus stands at the focal point of history. And just as Jesus stays on this cruel torture piece for several terrible hours, so should we spend time reflecting on the trials and testing He endured for us, and think again about the purposes of God for the whole of His creation played out in these few extraordinary moments.

The mockery Jesus endured is symbolic of human rejection of God throughout the years. To this day, people reject Jesus because He does not perform miracles to order, because he threatens the building and institutions that have been created by us in God's name, and because He confuses human thinking by fulfilling not popular demand but the very prophecies of God in our midst. His example tells us that we should expect miracles of God's presence, but not 'to human order', that the Holy Spirit does God's work of salvation at the edges of the Kingdom rather than at its institutional centre, and that our eyes should be on God's eternal purposes and not the expectations of the moment, of society, or even of our denominations

#### ***Jesus completed His work***

There is one magnificent truth about this passage of scripture, which is this. The true glory of the Cross is shown in the fact that Jesus did not come down from the it, He stayed on it. When reading for this study, I came across a powerful statement about this in the Commentary on Matthew by Davis and Alison (T&T Clarke – p523), particularly in its conclusion. To close our study today I shall slightly paraphrase what they say for brevity and clarity, but hope that it will speak as powerfully to you as it did to me.

*'Throughout Matthew, Jesus' divine sonship takes up two models. On the one hand, God's Son is the enthroned king, victorious over His enemies; on the other, God's Son is true Israel, called to a life of humble obedience and service. Those who (like the chief priests,*

elders and scribes) set these two concepts over and against each other and propose a path without affliction are like the devil, and mock the Crucified. Jesus refused to break apart the two sonships; He refused to reign without the suffering of obedience. He turned away from self seeking acts of power and chose to let God save Him in God's own time. Sonship does not mean leaving the cross, but staying on it.'

## **Questions for groups**

1. Which of the taunts jeered at Jesus do you feel to be the most cynical. How do they compare with the taunts thrown at Jesus today?
2. To what extent do you think that Jesus died according to prophecy as found in the Old Testament? What can we learn about it from the Old Testament?
3. What does the story of Jesus' death on the Cross mean to you as a Christian. Is this something you can explain, or is it beyond your powers of explanation?

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## **Final Prayer**

**We are stunned, Lord God, to read about those awful moments before You died. Yet like all history, we accept this because this is what happened. Help us to learn from all that happened to You, and so trust ourselves to You love and grace, because You hung there on the Cross for us, and for our salvation. AMEN**