

Prayers

To God

For pity's sake, Lord Jesus, have mercy on us all as we each face end of the life in which we have so heavily invested. Even now, make heaven so real to us that we can, like You, have confidence in the Father for what lies beyond the grave, and bring light eternal into our very presence, God of grace. AMEN

For Self

Quieten your soul before the awesome presence of Christ. If possible, place a cross or crucifix before you as you pray, and let it speak to your soul of God's mercy and grace. Do not be impatient to hear the voice of God.

For others

Pray for all who face death right now, and ask the Lord to be merciful to their souls. Pray especially for those who have never had a chance to know about the saving grace of God in Jesus; commend them to God's care and call on His love and compassion to save sinners.

Meditation

Who looks upon the image of cross or crucifix
And fails to feel, at least be moved
Is surely compromised ...

How deeply can you look?
Do the gory details draw you close or push away?
Will you let the naked truth now touch your soul?
Or choose, whatever, to turn away from death
To look elsewhere and say 'that's awful; shocking!'

Perhaps, because we know what happens next
We look beyond this gruesome day
To dwell instead on Easter's resurrection joy
The death of Christ in brutal savagery, too much
No sight to see when taking bread and wine ...

They say, 'He did it all for you and me'
But can you take this truth into your soul?
I ask, I plead, eternal life requires it ...
Please take this gift lest by default you lose it.
A choice as absolute as life and death.
Be touched by Christ's redeeming sacrifice.

Or join the rest and walk on by?

Bible Passage

Matthew 27:45-54

⁴⁵ From noon until three in the afternoon, darkness came over the whole land. ⁴⁶ And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice,

'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?'

which means,

'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

⁴⁷ Some of the bystanders heard it and said,

'He is calling for Elijah.'

⁴⁸ Straight away, one of them ran to get a sponge, soaked it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and offered it to him to drink. ⁴⁹ But others said,

'Wait, let's see whether Elijah comes to save him.'

⁵⁰ Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and gave up his spirit.

⁵¹ At that very moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; the earth shook, and the rocks split; ⁵² the tombs also opened, and many bodies of holy people who had died were raised. ⁵³ After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many people.

⁵⁴ When the centurion saw the earthquake and what took place, together with those who were watching over Jesus with him, they were terrified and said,

'Truly this man was the Son of God!'

Review

It is never easy to read this passage, because it describes the terrible death of Jesus. Yet this is the climax of Matthew's Gospel. The resurrection is still to come with its strange mixture of joy and confusion; but for now, the focus is on the Cross, something we cannot begin to understand unless we dwell on Scripture, and the reports of those who were there.

Time stands still, and the darkness

Time has slowed down to a standstill. Matthew's Gospel has raced along, from Jesus' birth (chs 1,2) through His ministry until He comes to Jerusalem (ch 21). A few days later, Jesus is taken captive (26:47-56), and appears before Caiaphas (26:57f.). The very next morning (27:1) He is brought to Pilate, is condemned to death and handed over for crucifixion. The story line has focussed down to this, and Time has slowed right down, and by midday, Jesus' life hangs by a thread.

Time stands still for three hours, and darkness descends representing both God's judgement and the respect of the universe at the sacrifice of Christ. The world was made out of darkness

(Gen 1:2), and a new creation will be needed to bring 'light' again. We are reminded of ancient prophecies, "*And on that day ... I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in daylight.*" (Amos 8:9, Joel 2:2,31 and Zeph. 1:15).

Jesus' last cry - calling for Elijah

This silence is broken by Jesus' cry, '*Eli, Eli lama sabachthani...*', meaning '*My God my God, why have you forsaken me!*' (27:46). What anguish! Those nearby were confused, thinking Jesus was calling for Elijah. Later on, people realised, as Matthew reports, that it is a quote from Psalm 22 (27:46; Psalm 22:1). The confusion may have been because the common language was not Greek or Hebrew, but Aramaic and those nearby did not realise Jesus was quoting from Hebrew. We can't be sure, and there remains uncertainty about what Jesus meant by this.

Does Jesus feel the abandonment of God whilst bearing the sins of humanity? Or does He cry out in hope of resurrection as witnesses to by Psalm 22? Matthew does not say; he just reports the facts. Other New Testament writers speak of the burden Christ bore on Calvary, but also the victory of the Cross (Rom 3:25, 2 Cor 5:21, Col 1:20, Heb 5:7-10; 7:27, 9:11-14). Perhaps both are true, but this does not mean we know what Jesus felt as He died.

Wine on a stick, and wait ...

So in the moment of His death, we are unsure what Jesus was really saying. Certainly, some of those nearby thought Jesus was hallucinating in pain, and we read of a flurry of activity as the people nearby attempt to do right by this dying man; they offer him wine, perhaps drugged to null the pain, but merely fulfil the prophecy; '*and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.*' (Psalm 69:22). Matthew sees this as proof of Jesus' atoning death.

The death of Jesus

As Jesus dies He calls out before He stops breathing (27:50). But what did Jesus cry out? Something meaningful or a cry of anguish? Together with Matthew, Mark suggests a cry of pain. Luke however reports as Jesus' last words as '*Father, forgive, they know not what they do*' (Luke 23:46). This does not sound like a death cry? What do we know? Was forgiveness offered in death through pain? If so, it cuts to the heart. John, different again, reports Jesus crying out '*It is finished*' (John 19:30), before he dies.

All this may seem to contradict, but who are we to think we know the order of events? This is all part of Jesus' final bequest to humanity and it tells us that in death, Jesus was a man like others, but divinely full of forgiveness and passion. Matthew records it all with the dignity of one who knew that death is rarely explainable and always mysterious. Some suggest that Jesus' loud last cry means He had more life left in Him, and so gave His life up voluntarily. But this presumes we know the mysteries of death. God knew, and he foretold it.

Cataclysmic events!

But is this story over? Certainly not! For without a break, Matthew records events of extraordinary power, immediately after Jesus' death! We might expect a respectful and thoughtful pause. But no, His death incredible releases power (27:51-54), and this is still Good Friday! In many church services for this day, the worshipper is left in suspense and must wait until Sunday for the good news. But this is not Matthew's story! From the very instant of Jesus' death, the Father acts immediately to vindicate Jesus by performing miracles, divinely proving

Jesus' ministry and teaching! Remember, the accusation levelled at Jesus was that He would tear down the Temple and rebuild it! So God now tears down the '*veil of the Temple*' (27:51)!

The Temple curtain torn in two!

But which curtain? Was it the outer one separating the Sanctuary from the Gentile court, a great Babylonian tapestry depicting the whole world and standing eighty feet high? If this was torn it would prove the Gentiles were now acceptable to God! Or was it the inner veil separating the Courtyard from the Temple Sanctuary, meaning the Temple priesthood had been abolished? Or was it the curtain within the Sanctuary separating the 'Holy Place' from the 'Holy of Holies', meaning that the division between God and humanity abolished?

Scriptures suggest any of these may be true; the writer of Hebrews (6:19, 9:1-28, 10:20) gives hints but to no conclusion. Perhaps Matthew regarded the 'curtain' as standing for all that was wrong with the Temple, no matter which one! Another explanation of the rending of the Temple veil could be that this was the Father's outrage at the religious authorities who had killed His Son. Certainly, it would not be long before the whole Temple was torn down by the Romans (in AD70), sanctuaries, courts, curtains and all.

The opening of the tombs (27:52,53)

Then, after this, Matthew records an earthquake splitting rocks and opening tombs, suggesting the Lord's 'Last Judgement' (Is 26:19, Dan 12:2, and Ez 37:1-14). It is dramatic stuff, but earthquakes were not uncommon in Jerusalem, and people generally believed this to be a sign that 'bodies of holy people were being raised'; the idea is well documented. Yet this particular miracle is best understood as evidence of the link between the death of God's Son and His eternal purposes. A new work of Salvation had begun!

There is something refreshingly glorious about the way God goes about dispensing power with liberality; you could call it resurrection power, before Easter Day! Clearly, something amazing happened because those who watched Jesus die '*saw the earthquake and all that took place*' (27:54).

The conclusion of the Centurion (27:54)

There is one last witness to this from whom we must hear. Soldiers had killed Jesus, and had earlier mocked Him, unworried by the theological issues of the Jews or the disciples. Yet at His death, they saw something different, and deduced that what was written over Jesus' head was in fact true. So, as an independent witnesses convinced of something he has not expected to see, the centurion announces '*Truly this man was the Son of God!*' His declaration of faith is as powerful as any in Scripture.

Application

The death of Jesus and the glorious consequences

'Good Friday' saw the trial of Jesus, his flogging and crucifixion, his mocking and his ultimate death, but it did not end in despair. This, in itself is a major lesson and learning point for us. Matthew certainly reports the awfulness of what happened; he was one of those who had failed to follow Jesus and do what was asked of him (26:56), and we can feel with Matthew as he records this story. Yet in hindsight, he was able to see that although he had been in great despair, the power of God was already at work, and he clearly wants us to know that God was

at work from the very moment of Jesus' death. What faith, and what an inspiration for us, even today!

Matthew 27 records but one dramatic day, which ends with the death of Jesus and the unleashing of God's power. It was a very special day for God. Whatever we learn individually from reflecting on the awesome events of that day, I suggest we remember that Christ's death led to a great display of the Father's power and a foretaste of what was to come in the resurrection. Good Friday may be for us a moment of pure tragedy, but God was waiting for this moment and knew exactly what He would do. We should have faith in Him.

Observations on Jesus' death

Yet we must continue to reflect on the death of Jesus and all it meant, and I simply offer my own observations. Whilst Jesus may have feared physical death as any man would, He had to handle a spiritual battle with death because as Jews understood, death was a form of separation from the Father. Facing this is what caused Jesus' agony in Gethsemane, and from that time on He knew His death would happen. He knew that He would be separated from the Father, but God would powerfully overcome that separation in a way which, as a man, He could not know until it happened. In this way, Jesus Himself shows us something of the faith we need to have in the power of God. It is not simple, but it will be rewarded.

Jesus suffered the pain of death and its associated separation from the Father. But even though He could not yet experience it, He knew the resurrection hope prophesied in Scripture, especially in Psalm 22 *'to you they cried and were saved, in you they trusted and were not put to shame'* (Ps 22:5). Thank God that this resurrection hope is present with us whatever the dire circumstances in which we find ourselves. Hope in the face of death is one of God's greatest gifts, and we treat it lightly at our peril.

Questions for groups

- 1. Take time to reflect on the death of Jesus, and read through this passage. Listen for what the Lord God says to you through these immensely important words.*
- 2. In what sense can we say that Jesus gave up His spirit voluntarily? Discuss your own reactions to the death of Jesus on the cross.*
- 3. What does this scripture say to people who are dying? Can it give hope or does it merely confirm the inevitable?*

Final Prayer

Lord God, speak into our hearts the truth of Jesus' great work for us on the Cross, and where words are not enough, enlighten our spirits. Forgive us if we have misunderstood the mysteries of Salvation, and lead us into all truth as we read about the death of Jesus, AMEN