

Prayer

You are the Lord of all, Jesus Christ, Saviour of the World. Let us appreciate the majesty of Your awesome power in the natural world, the incredibly gentle touch of Your healing hand, the stimulating possibilities of the challenges You pose to the human intellect, and the calm and patient care with which You lead us through life. Then, may we praise You with vigour and enthusiasm, all our days! AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Give thanks to God for the power of the resurrection to bring you new life. Think about what God has done in your life over the years and praise Him.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for the church of God** *Many Christians dislike church institutions. Pray for God to revive His true Church, His people of faith*
- *Give thanks for the Easter message and what it means to you*
- *Pray for those who reject Jesus and all He has done for us*

Meditation

Find beauty in companionship,
For Jesus is our friend and respects our love:

Find beauty in simply duties,
For Christ empowers us to do all that's good:

Find beauty in helping the poor
For the Son of God brought hope to the world:

Find beauty in doing what is right,
For the Spirit creates the fruit of the Spirit within:

Find beauty in working with others
For the Father loves the unity of His people:

Find beauty in overcoming problems
For the Lord our God is victorious over all evil:

Find beauty is resting from all you do
For God Himself rested, and loves the Sabbath.

Bible passage - Matthew 28:11-20

¹¹ While they were going, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had happened. ¹² Then they met with elders and devised a plan to give the soldiers a large sum of money, ¹³ telling them, 'You must say, "His disciples came by night and stole him while we were asleep." ¹⁴ If the governor hears of this, we will deal with him and keep you out of trouble.' ¹⁵ So they took the money and did as they were told. And to this day, that is the story told among the Jews.

¹⁶ The eleven disciples then went to the mountain in Galilee where Jesus had arranged to meet them. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸ Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'

Bible Study

Review

In this brief yet powerful passage, Matthew concludes his Gospel with two important paragraphs. The first accounts for the false stories told about the resurrection and places the blame for them firmly at the door of the guards and the chief priests (28:11-15). The second describes the famous and important account of Jesus' meeting with the disciples in Galilee, when He gave them the 'Great Commission'. This is a highly significant text, and it is probably used as much for preaching as the famous text, John 3:16 (*'For God so loved the world ...'*).

Before we look at each part of this reading, it is worth noting that when read together, they powerfully illustrate the two ways people respond to the story of the resurrection, and in particular, the saving work He accomplished. Some find themselves caught up in suspicion, gossip and misinformation about Christ, as did the chief priests after they heard from the guards at the tomb. Others will genuinely meet with the risen Lord, and when they do, He commissions them to do His will. Over the centuries, people have tried to sit on the fence and avoid making decisions about the truth of this and the other Gospel reports, perhaps by seeking further proof. But all this is to no avail. We can search as much as we like, eventually we are faced with a decision as to whether we accept the account or not, and once we have seriously considered it, our decision will determine our destiny.

The story of the guards is told by Matthew simply to help Christians understand that the Jewish authorities were responsible for the story about a cover to explain Jesus' death. From Matthew's day until now, this has remained an important issue, and there are those who will still feel that the resurrection was not real, and prefer to accept conspiracy theories from a variety of sources. But where can such questioning ever end? It is a route to intellectual and spiritual frustration, because those who require some other proof of the resurrection simply ask for what they cannot have, for history does not have 'replays'. Too often, this pathway is chosen by those who have already decided they will not believe the Gospel. Matthew's report of the first Easter Sunday is either received by us in faith or it is not received, moreover, history shows that those who receive it fully are changed people, and those who will not receive it remain as they are, and their questions are not resolved, at least, from a worldly point of view.

The last part of the story is powerfully brief, and it is both surprising and very important. To begin with, we read that the disciples met with Jesus, but had great difficulty believing (28:17). We should not be too worried by this, rather, we should remember the sheer terror of what they had experienced. Moreover, the idea of meeting someone who had just been killed is scary enough! Instead of ignoring verse 17 and its comments about doubt, we should rather perceive that typical to true life, doubt comes before true faith.

Despite problems, the disciples gathered in Galilee to meet their Master, because despite their initial doubts, they accepted the message from the women and were obedient to Jesus' summons. This was a crucial part of the journey of faith walked by the first disciples, and it led directly to the establishment of the Early Church.

Elsewhere, the Bible tells us that the church began after the coming of the Holy Spirit (see Acts 2), but Matthew has a different and complementary angle on what happened. He tells us simply that Jesus gave authority to the disciples to put into practice everything He had taught them during His ministry (28:19). This 'Great Commission' points us forwards to the work that the disciples would do to found the Church, and it also points us back to the need to learn from all that Jesus said and did. We need Matthew's insight as well as the story of the coming of the Holy Spirit from Acts if we are to understand 'what happened next'!

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- The report of the guards
- The gathering of the eleven
- The Great Commission

Going Deeper

The report of the guards

Apart from the obvious need to provide a cover story for what happened, the guards at Jesus' tomb were in deep trouble themselves. They had witnessed not the risen Jesus (who appeared to the two women later as they left to tell their message to the disciples), but the destruction of the seals they placed on the tomb by an

angel. This was not easily explainable! Moreover, they must have soon discovered that body had disappeared, a fact that is surely verified by their desire to explain why it had gone!

It is not surprising that some of the soldiers wished to keep their mouths shut about the whole thing, but some of their number went to the chief priests and elders in order to try and find a way of saving face for all concerned (28:12). They needed to be able to say that the disciples had taken Jesus, and that meant accepting some kind of negligence on the part of the soldiers. A story was put together and the soldiers were bribed accordingly (28:13,14). The sum of money required for this would be considerable, because a guard caught sleeping on duty in the Roman army risked the death penalty, and Pilate was not known to be lenient.

The guards were given the money, told what to say, and re-assured that influence would be brought to bear on their behalf if the story was ever heard by Pilate (v14). The concocted story was itself is highly improbable, and if it were indeed the truth it would be barely believable. How was it possible to dismantle a tomb seal without waking up soldiers if indeed they were sleeping? Why would the soldiers be asleep, anyway? One can hardly imagine anyone taking the guards seriously unless they passed it on as a 'this is what we are supposed to say' story. One can easily see why a further cover up would be needed if Pilate began to ask questions (v14)!

The gathering of the eleven

The eleven remaining disciples travelled to Galilee to meet Jesus. It is not difficult to wonder what must have been going through their minds. From the point of view of Matthew's Gospel, none of them had seen the risen Jesus at that point, and all they had was they report of the women. One of their number, Judas, had killed himself, and they had all deserted the man who was now summoning them to meet Him. It may even be that some of them had kept at a distance from everything and had no real knowledge of the facts of either the death or burial of the Lord, let alone his Resurrection. The journey to Galilee may well have been important, enabling them to come to terms with what they had all done or not done; we can imagine they would have had to talk together a great deal.

All this forms an important background to the meeting of the disciples with Jesus (28:17). This verse is unfortunately well known because of one phrase which comes at the end; 'but some doubted'. Arguments have raged between scholars for centuries over the meaning of the Greek at this point in the sentence, but it is entirely clear to any independent translator. A literal translation of the Greek of this sentence is 'when they saw Him, they worshipped Him, but they doubted'. This sounds very strange, and it might paint the disciples in a very odd light if this were to mean that the disciples all doubted Jesus. Because of this, detailed research has established the rare possibility that it just might be possible to translate the phrase 'but some doubted', and this is the traditional translation found in most Bibles. This version does not surprise us as we know from John's Gospel that one of the disciples (Thomas) did indeed doubt the whole story of the resurrection, and this therefore makes what Matthew says sound more reasonable. Unfortunately, the verse has become a 'test case' between different schools of theology, which does not help.

I have translated it according to tradition because I do not believe that either case is proven; and I therefore stay with tradition. However, it seems highly likely that the disciples who had not yet seen Jesus (only the women had) harboured a myriad of questions about what had happened. It was indeed part of their faith to travel on a journey to meet Jesus with many questions or doubts in their minds, and when they saw Jesus, they might well have had doubts in their minds because they had not witnessed his death, let alone his resurrection.

Verse 17 hides more than a problem over the translation of the last clause. Taken as a whole, the sentence tells us that all the disciples worshipped Jesus despite their doubts. That in itself is crucial, for 'worship' in Jewish and Christian tradition means forgiveness and reconciliation as well as 'bowing down' before God. Because of this, we can find more in this simple sentence, for example, the worship of Peter, who needed to be accepted again by his Lord whom he had failed. Also, the moment of worship was a moment in which all the disciples had a common experience of Jesus again, and they all saw Jesus alive. It was a moment for doubts both to be exposed and to be overcome in the worship of the risen Lord.

The Great Commission

The final words Jesus addressed to the disciples are of supreme important, and deserve more attention than can be given in this study. Essentially, Jesus summed up all He had done in His life and in this brief speech, handed over the work He had done to the disciples. Moreover, He gave them all the authority that had been given to Him by the Father, authority that the disciples had witnessed throughout His life and ministry and which was now confirmed by His Resurrection. In this spirit, Jesus commanded the disciples to go about doing the work of God in the world in order that all people might have the opportunity to be brought back into a relationship with God the Father.

This mission is nothing less than the plan of God for the salvation of all creation. The plan was put in place at the beginning of Creation following the tragedy of 'the fall' (Gen. 3) in which the relationship between God and humanity had been compromised by sin. The plan had been entrusted to the Israelites who had failed to carry it through and be 'a light to the nations' (Isaiah 49:6). God Himself had rescued the plan from human failure by sending His Son to complete it, and provide a means of salvation through His ministry, death and resurrection. Jesus now passed on the responsibility for this great task to the disciples.

As Jesus did this, He included instructions that brought together what he had done with a supreme promise of divine help (28:20). The disciples were to 'make disciples of all nations', just as He had made disciples during His own ministry, and they were to follow His and John the Baptist's example in using the practice of baptism. Matthew then records Jesus using a formula which is unique in the Gospels; 'in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'. This is the famous 'Trinitarian' formula which only Matthew reports, and yet seems to sum up everything we know about God now that Jesus has come and fulfilled his divine purpose. It is a formula that played a significant role in helping the early church to understand Jesus' divinity and also agree the unity of God, and these words are regarded by most churches as essential to the practice of Baptism, as essential, even, as water!

The last command (28:20) is a clear instruction to the disciples to pass on all that Jesus had taught them; an instruction that Matthew himself fulfilled by writing a Gospel, and other disciples fulfilled in other feats of evangelism, teaching, writing or leadership. It is no small part of what we are each commanded to give attention to by our Lord; for how can we be His followers if we do not know in detail what He said and did?

The command to discipleship is accompanied by a final promise at the end of the Gospel that has been treasured by Christians as the greatest and most necessary of blessings; the presence of the Saviour Himself. 'I am with you always, to the end of the age' (28:20). This promise is a fulfilment of Jesus' name 'Immanuel' (meaning 'God with us') given to Him at birth by the angel (Matt 1:23), and without it, the Great Commission cannot be fulfilled. Yet with it, everything is possible.

Application

Theses could be written about almost every word or phrase of these last words of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel. However, we need to consider the meaning of these words and how they should be put into practice. Thousands of preachers have dealt with these issues over thousands of years, and in so doing have presented to us only what Jesus Himself presented to the first disciples. However, if all we do is explore the meaning of what Jesus said, then we gain virtually nothing. Crucial, we need to know whether God's people will put this command into practice. We are talking about doing what God requires for the salvation of people throughout the world, from now until eternity. No more pressing issue stands before us in any age.

Whether we are obedient to this commission surely defines whether we stand in the tradition of discipleship according to Matthew. More than that, because his Gospel is accepted by the God's people as scripture, it defines whether we are Christ's disciples at all. Matthew's Gospel does not stand above the others in what it says; it simply expresses the call of discipleship in this clear and distinct way. The other Gospels do not disagree; they present the same information about Jesus' call on the life of His disciples in different ways, and they have other things to say as well. We will only discover what they have to say when we study them, and for the moment, we should be sure to respond to the Gospel Matthew has written for us as he has so clearly asked of us. We are called to have faith in Him who died and rose for us, and to be obedient to His commission.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Does it worry you to think that some of the disciples 'doubted' (28:17)? What do you think they doubted?
2. Is Jesus' speech an adequate summary of the task of the church today? If not, what should be added?
3. Was Jesus right to have confidence in the disciples' memories of what He had taught? Why did He not write down his teaching; it could have been done?

Topics covered by this text

- *The reports of scandal perpetrated by the disciples*
- *Doubt and faith*
- *Baptism and the Trinity*
- *The Great Commission*

Personal comments by author

The passage of scripture today forms a crucial definition of discipleship in scripture. Your challenge and mine is fulfil it! From time to time we must all check up on how we measure up to its challenges, and make changes in our lives to ensure that we are in the right place to be obedient to Him. Personally, I have been conscious of this passage for most of my Christian life; but looking back, I think I have been more fruitful in carrying out this commission at some times than at others. I, like you, have to submit my failures to the Lord, and yet also rejoice in what has gone well!

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Undoubtedly, Jesus accepted the disciples despite their failures. What failures of your does Jesus accept and forgive? How does this affect you? Pray to the Lord and ask Him to keep you aware of His grace towards you.*
- *Write down a list of things you believe should be done if the church today is to fulfil the commission of Jesus in Matthew 28:19. Discuss this with others in the church and refine your list, and your understanding of this great call.*

Final Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus, You trust me, and I do not understand why You feel able to do this. Sometimes I can trust myself, but often I cannot. Your love and compassion is more than I can understand, but use me, I pray for the work of Your Kingdom, and may I be an ever willing servant! AMEN
