

## Prayers

### Opening prayer

Holy Spirit of God, surround my day with Your peace, steer me through the day with Your power, touch my mind with Your wisdom, and comfort my heart with Your love. May I live to the Glory of God as long as I have breath to proclaim it and time to live it, and may I always witness to the truth about God found in Jesus Christ my Saviour. AMEN

### Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: TRANSPORT

**1. For yourself**

*Thank God for His love and mercy in giving you protection when you have travelled*

**2. For your friends and family**

*Praise God for His love and mercy in giving protection to those you love on their journeys*

**3. For the church and its work**

*Praise God for the effective means of transport available today by which the Gospel can be taken throughout the world, according to God's plan*

**4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)**

*Give thanks to God for the amazing inventions of petrol and diesel engines and the other forms of power that are essential to travel by land sea or air. Pray that humanity will find ever more useful and effective means of power in years to come.*

### Meditation

Be comforted, you who have felt the power of sin,  
There is One who has the victory over Satan's evil sway.

Be strengthened, you who know cruel oppression,  
There is One who has the courage to win your freedom.

Be heartened, you who struggle with your burdens,  
There is One who takes the weight you suffer on Himself.

Be encouraged, you who need to hear Good News,  
There is One who broke through death to bring you love.

Be enlightened, you who have a heart to understand,  
There is One who taught the way of life, and lived it perfectly.

Be enthused, you who are willing to speak your faith,  
There is One who works through you in authority and power!

Be blessed, you who have walked in hope and joy,  
There is One who holds a personal place for you in heaven!

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## Bible Study

### Bible passage – Acts 1:15-26

<sup>15</sup> One day, Peter stood up among the believers, a group of about a hundred and twenty people, <sup>16</sup> and said,

'Fellow believers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through the mouth of David, about Judas, who was a guide for those who arrested Jesus. <sup>17</sup> he was one of our number and shared in this ministry.'

<sup>18</sup> (Now, this man had bought a field with the money he was paid for his crime, and falling headlong, his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out. <sup>19</sup> Everyone in Jerusalem heard about this, so they called that field 'Akeldama' in their language, meaning, 'Field of Blood'.)

<sup>20</sup> Now it is written in Scripture,

"May his place be deserted; let there be no-one to dwell in it," and,

"May another take his place of leadership."

<sup>21</sup> So we must choose one of the men who has been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, <sup>22</sup> beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. One of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection.'

<sup>23</sup> So they proposed two men: Joseph called Barsabbas (also known as Justus) and Matthias, <sup>24</sup> and then they prayed,

'Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen <sup>25</sup> to take over this apostolic ministry, which Judas left to go where he belongs.'

<sup>26</sup> Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias, and he was therefore added to the eleven apostles.

## Review

***Peter takes courage as the leader of the early disciples; he calls on Jesus' followers to make up for the loss of Judas Iscariot, whose betrayal of Jesus and subsequent death has left vacancy in the apostolic twelve. He puts the situation to the group, they pray, and then cast lots. God's choice is made known; it is to be Matthias.***

The first chapter of Acts is the powerful story of what happened to the disciples when Jesus finally left them. It records Jesus' last words and specifically, His instruction that the disciples should remain in Jerusalem and await the coming of the Holy Spirit (1:8f.). While the disciples waited, they needed to do one thing; to choose a twelfth member of their group because one of their number, Judas Iscariot, had betrayed Jesus and paid for it with his life (1:18). It seems a mundane matter to us today, but it was important for the early disciples, who appreciated more fully than us the significance of '12' for the leadership of Israel. Old Israel comprised 12 'tribes', so God's new Church would also need '12' witnesses to the life and work of Jesus Christ. It was time for Peter to stand up as the leader of the disciples and to take charge. He put the matter to those present (1:14), and made it a matter of prayer, before lots were cast and Matthias was chosen.

These are the bones of the story, and the structure they provide is simple enough. Nevertheless, a number of intriguing points arise as we study more carefully. To begin with, verse 15 tells us in a matter of fact way that between the resurrection and the Ascension, the group of Jesus' followers had risen at least tenfold. From the original twelve disciples they now mustered, *'about one hundred and twenty people!* The Holy Spirit was about to be poured upon the church to enable it to achieve even greater gains, but this numerical increase is a remarkable testament to God's sovereign power.

The next significant feature of the story is found in verses 18 and 19, where we are told what happened to Judas Iscariot, the man who betrayed Jesus. In an aside to what he is saying about replacing Judas, Peter describes what happened to him; he *'bought a field with the money he was paid for his crime, and falling headlong, his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out'* (1:18), and according to Peter, this, and the name of the field purchased by Judas, was common knowledge at the time.

If we are not too familiar with Scripture, then we may simply accept what is said here without further ado. However, Matthew's Gospel tells us an apparently different story. It tells us that Judas repented after he saw what happened when Jesus was condemned (Matthew 27:3), so he bought his 'blood money' back to the *'chief priests and elders'* who had given it to him in the first place. It was then the Temple authorities who purchased a potter's field with this money, and Matthew saw this as a fulfilment of some famous Old Testament prophecies, from Zechariah 11:12,13, and Jeremiah 19:1-13; 32:6-9.

There are two main differences between the story of Judas' death in Matthew's Gospel and that in Acts. Luke tells us that Judas bought the field, and Matthew tells us that the Temple authorities purchased it; Luke

tells us that Judas 'fell headlong' and died, but Matthew says that Judas committed suicide (Matthew 27:5). It could be that the manner of death is the same, but Luke is more reticent about Judas' suicide. The more significant difference therefore lies in who purchased the field, and it is perhaps to be expected that this was the subject of intrigue in the days after Jesus' resurrection. We can only account for the differences between Luke (in Acts) and Matthew by saying that we do not know how it was purchased. We can only know this; a field was indeed purchased with the blood money Judas first received for his betrayal of Jesus.

Whatever we think of all this, Peter knew exactly what to do and say. Jesus had commissioned him at Caesarea Philippi to be a bold and faithful leader, so he began his leadership by seeking to ensure that this spiritual 'status quo' was upheld. One disciple has been lost to the core group of those who had witnessed the life, death, Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus Christ, and now another individual who had been close enough would have to step in and take this vacancy. Peter's leadership was immaculate. He brought the matter to the attention of the faithful, meaning the 120 souls who followed Jesus after the Resurrection (1:15), and called them to prayer. One of them was about to be elevated!

Peter's prayer was simple and straightforward. He committed the matter into God's hands firstly by confessing that God knows the hearts of his servants (1:24) and he asked for revelation concerning the choice (1:25). It comes as something of a surprise to us to discover in the last verse of our passage today that having prayed, the assembled group cast lots to choose Judas's replacement! It is not something we would do today! Nevertheless, these first century Christians had faith to believe that God was able to control even the drawing of lots, so that His will was done on Earth. Matthias was chosen to be added to the number of twelve core disciples and witnesses to the truth about Jesus Christ.

## Going Deeper

- Peter's speech
- The difference between Luke's account of Judas's death and that of Matthew
- The quote from the book of Psalms in verse 20
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### ***Peter's speech***

Most of this passage is in the form of speech, spoken by Peter, with the report of the election at its conclusion. You can easily see how this works from the way the passage is presented here, with verses 18 and 19 forming a side thought, or 'parenthesis', to what Peter is saying. We do not know whether this thought was Peter's or whether it was added later by Luke, to help us understand the full context of what was happening. We cannot know which it is, but if you read other Bible versions, you will certainly discover that some of them make for difficult reading.

### ***The difference between Luke's account of Judas's death and that of Matthew***

Below is the passage from Matthew's Gospel which deals with the death of Judas; it should be read by all those who wish to study today's passage in depth:

*When Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he repented and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. <sup>4</sup> He said,*

*'I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.'*

*But they said,*

*'What is that to us? See to it yourself.'*

<sup>5</sup> *Throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself. <sup>6</sup> But the chief priests, taking the pieces of silver, said,*

*'It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, since they are blood money.'*

<sup>7</sup> *After conferring together, they used them to buy the potter's field as a place to bury foreigners. <sup>8</sup> For this reason that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day.*

<sup>9</sup> *Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah,*

*'And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of the one on whom a price had been set, on whom some of the people of Israel had set a price, <sup>10</sup> and they gave them for the potter's field, as the Lord commanded me.'*

The differences between Matthew's and Luke's account of what happened to Judas is probably explained by the different stories about him that emerged in the early church. We should not try and say that one is

definitive and the other is not; rather we must accept that there was confusion over many of the details of the story, and take hold of those things that are consistently said in each story, and there is plenty. Clearly, Judas was tortured with guilt over what happened and he eventually killed himself (however we explain it). But not only do we remember Judas because of what he did to Jesus, he has left behind a permanent testimonial to his life and death in the field, which according to tradition, is now where non-Jews are buried outside Jerusalem.

### ***The quote from the book of Psalms in verse 20***

In verse 22 quote from the book of Psalms; the first of these comes from Psalm 69:25;

*'May their place be deserted; let there be no-one to dwell in their tents'*

The second quote comes from Psalm 109:8;

*'May his days be few; may another seize his position.'*

If we compare what Peter says here with the quotes from Psalm in our modern Bibles, then it is fairly clear that the two are similar, although not exactly the same. Here, as throughout the New Testament, there is a simple explanation for the differences between New Testament quotes of the Old Testament and the actual Old Testament text in our bibles today. The writers of the New Testament quoted a version of the Old Testament they knew well, which came from an ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew original done in the second century BC, called the 'Septuagint'; it was in common use in Jesus' day.

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## **Discipleship**

### **Application**

- The death of Judas
- A selection criterion for leadership within the church
- The casting of lots

### ***The death of Judas***

The awful death of Judas as a reminder to us that there can be a penalty for sin even within life as we know it, today. Of course, God is the ultimate judge of all, and we cannot know the fate of any individual from what we perceive of this life. Nevertheless, the reason Judas's death is recorded here in Scripture is because early Christians could see that God's hand was at work in what happened to Judas.

The challenge to us now is to look at things that are happening around us today, even matters of life and death that affect those close to us, and try to see what God is doing in these circumstances. Sometimes it is indeed possible to see the outworking of His wrath or the outworking of His blessing, and it is only when we exercise such faith that we begin to see and understand more of the spiritual realities of what is unfolding all around us.

### ***A selection criterion for leadership within the church***

When speaking in this passage of Scripture, Peter is insistent that those put forward for leadership should be completely familiar with Jesus' life. He wanted to make sure that they knew everything, as he says, *'from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us'* (1:22). It therefore seems wise that in the Christian church, we make sure that those put forward for leadership should have a very good understanding of Jesus, and all that we know about His life and death, and His Resurrection and Ascension.

I do not mean that they have to be familiar with modern academic trends in Biblical study; this has its merits, but the candidate should first and foremost know the Gospels and indeed the whole Bible, because it points to Jesus Christ. One would think that this was part of the selection process for church leadership in mainstream churches today, but be careful, where these things are sometimes assessed academically rather than spiritually, and something important is lost.

Notice also that in this passage, knowledge of Jesus and His life and work does not guarantee someone a position in the life of the church. Barsabbas was not selected for the position amongst the 12, and we do not read of a package of care for the poor men after the awful rejection he received when the lot was not cast on him! He was doubtless disappointed, but the focus of the story, and the focus of the work of the church, must be home the life and mission of God's church, fulfilling the mission of Christ. Not the sensibilities of individuals who feel that their gifts and graces have been rejected.

### ***The casting of lots***

We may pour scorn on the idea of casting lots today because it sounds like fatalism and an invitation to indulge in games of 'chance'. Some feel that such things are the thin end of the wedge towards gambling and betting. So be it. We must still consider the fact that God is able to use all faulty human processes in order to do his will, and it might be that sometimes, after prayer and careful consideration, the only way forward to make a decision before God is to cast lots. Certainly, Peter's example here should be followed; the matter is discussed openly by all those involved, it is put to the Lord God in prayer, and the lots are drawn and the result immediately accepted by all, without question. I wonder whether we could manage the faith to do anything like that today?

### Questions for groups

1. What does this Scripture teach us about the early disciples of Jesus, and how they approached making decisions?
2. Why should Christians use, or not use, the casting of lots to decide important things today? Is 'chance' something God can hallow and use, or is it merely godless?
3. The early church was led by Peter and the twelve apostles. Is this structure copied in any way within your church, and should it be, or should it not?

### Discipleship challenges

- *What do you think of Scripture when within its pages there are contradictions? Think about this for a time, and then offer you thoughts to God in prayer. Seek also to discuss what you think about this with others in your church.*
- *Make sure that in the course of your day, you offer any major decisions you have to make to the Lord in prayer. You do not have to make it a long prayer (see Bible passage, 1:24,25), but do your best to do this consistent and evaluate what you have done.*

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## **Final Prayer**

We thank You and we praise You Lord Jesus Christ for the gift of life You have given us. We cannot begin to understand why You have made us and nor can we fathom the immense love You have shown us in securing our redemption. May we forever praise You throughout the whole of our lives, and when we come to the end, may we look forward to the gift of eternal life with gratitude. Thank You Lord Jesus Christ:  
AMEN

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