

HOW JESUS PRAYED

by Ray C. Stedman

He was praying in a certain place, and when he ceased, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." (Luke 11:1 {RSV})

Jesus was a source of continuous amazement to his own disciples. Life with him was one unending experience of joy and bewilderment, and they were forever attempting to explain him to their own satisfaction. They had traveled with him the length and breadth of the land of Israel and it had been like a great military campaign. They saw inroads made into the darkening powers of sickness, death, and despair throughout the land. The disciples could not forget the mighty demonstrations of his power. They remembered the grateful eyes of those lame, blind, sick, dumb, and deaf, and afflicted who had been healed and set free and sent back to their loved ones. They were continually astonished at the wisdom that Jesus manifested. They were forever watching him, wondering what was the secret of his wisdom and of his power. When he was eating, sleeping, teaching, traveling, they were always watching. And here, Luke says, he was praying, and when he had ceased, one of them spoke to him. The disciples were watching him in prayer and as they watched there dawned the realization in the heart of one of the disciples, unnamed, that somehow the amazing power of Jesus was connected with his prayer life. When he had finished, one of them, speaking for all the disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray."

This is a very significant request, because these disciples were undoubtedly already men of prayer. When they say to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples," they do not mean to imply that John had a superior school of ministry. They are not saying, "In that traveling seminary that John conducted he had a course on prayer, but you have not told us anything about this yet." What they mean is, "Some of us once were John's disciples and were taught by him how to pray, but Lord, we have been watching you, and we see that you are a master at prayer. Now as John once taught us how to pray, would you also impart to us the secrets of prayer? For, as we have been watching you, we have seen that in some manner the marvel and mystery of your character is linked with your prayer life, and it has made us aware how little we really know about prayer. Lord, would you teach us to pray?"

If there is one prayer more than another that is burning in my own heart,, it is that each of us at Peninsula Bible Church might come to the place where, in all simplicity, out of an awareness of our own deep need in this respect, we cry out as did this disciple, with urgency, "Lord, teach us to pray." For the brutal fact is, we do not know how to pray, either as individuals or as a corporate body, the church. The proof that we do not know how to pray as individuals is found in the tremendous amount of fainting that is visible in our midst. In our previous studies in prayer, we faced our Lord's words that men ought always to pray and not to faint. That is, it is either prayer or fainting, one or the other. Life is such, he said, that men either discover the mighty ministry of prayer or they drift off into the discouragement and frustration of a feeble, powerless, useless, fruitless life. And the proof that there is an individual prayerlessness in our midst is the fainting that abounds among us, the discouragement, anxiety, fear, guilt and despair, and this pathetic, aimless groping that is evident in many lives.

I know there are glowing exceptions to this, and I thank God for them. There are those among us who have learned something of the strengthening ministry of prayer in the individual life, and it is openly evident. There are those who have a joy and a glow in their experience that cannot be denied. There are those who approach every circumstance with that compelling, irresistible triumph that marks authentic Christian faith, and in their lives the ministry of prayer is very evident. But we must admit there is much of fainting too, among young and old alike, and this marks the lack of real prayer. There is a strange resistance to active involvement in deeds of ministry and of service, a fear to venture ourselves, to risk our lives in some outgoing, self-giving ministry. There is a pathetic effort to defend ourselves in this and to excuse our lack of willingness and availability. Again, there are glowing exceptions to this, and I thank God for them, but there still is evident among us the weakness of prayerlessness.

The proof that we do not pray corporately as a church is the feeble performance in this respect. I do not understand it, I must confess, but there seems to be a silent conspiracy to avoid the prayer meeting. I am speaking plainly, but I must add this word, that I have absolutely no wish to stand up here and scorch anyone. I do not desire to flog you, or to burn or flay anyone from the pulpit, and certainly not to work up a kind of forced attendance at prayer meeting, though God knows I wanted to do so at times. But I must face up to an unswerving fact, and that is, if, in this vital area, we who are Christians are failing, it is simply because we have not yet seen what prayer is, and the part it plays in Christian living. Somehow the enemy has blurred our senses and dimmed our eyes so that we do not see this clearly. It is in the hope that these messages may help to meet that lack, and to clarify this need, that I am bringing this series on prayer. I would like to ask each of us to join this unnamed disciple and cry out of desperate, hungry, powerless lives these words, "Lord, teach us to pray."

One thing is immediately evident. When we say these words, out of hearts that mean them, we have already taken the first and most important step toward discovering the power of prayer. When we ask, "Teach us to pray," we are doing so out of a sense of need and prayer is simply the expression of human need to an eager Father. Prayer is the cry of a beloved child to a Father with a father's heart who is ready to pour out all that he has to give, and when we come to this prayer "Lord, teach us to pray," we are crying out of such a sense of need.

We will examine in due course what our Lord said to these disciples in response to this request, but for the present we will be content to ask: "What did they see in his life that wrung this cry from their hearts?" What was it that impressed them as they watched Jesus pray and convinced them that his prayer life and his amazing power and wisdom were somehow together?

They saw first of all that, with Jesus, prayer was a necessity. It was more than an occasional practice on his part, it was a lifelong habit. It was an attitude of mind and heart. It was an atmosphere in which he lived, it was the very air he breathed. Everything he did arose out of prayer. He literally prayed without ceasing. The Apostle Paul urges us to pray without ceasing. As these disciples watched Jesus they saw that he was praying without ceasing.

Obviously it was not always formal prayer. He did not kneel every time, though he knelt sometimes. He did not stand with bowed head in an attitude of prayer continually. If he did, of course, he could not get anything done. The amazing thing is that he fulfilled his prayer life in the midst of an incredibly busy ministry. It is astonishing how much he crammed into three years. He was subjected, like many of us, to a life of increasing pressure, of continual interruption. He never set out to accomplish something but that he was continuously interrupted. As he ministered he met with growing opposition, with increasing harassment and continual resistance to the course that he was taking, even from his own disciples. Yet, in the midst of this life of incredible busy-ness and tremendous pressure and continuous interruption, he was constantly in prayer. He was praying in spirit when his hands were busy healing. He gave thanks as he was breaking the bread and feeding the five thousand. At the tomb of Lazarus before he spoke those words, "Lazarus, come forth" {John 11:43b KJV}, in that dramatic display of power, he gave thanks to the Father openly. When the Greeks came and wanted to see Jesus, the message was brought to him and his immediate response was one of prayer, "Father," he said, "glorify Thy name," {John 12:28a KJV}. There was a continual sense of expectation that the Father would be working through him and thus he was praying by his attitude all the time.

This is the secret of prayer and of the prayer life. It is to practice this constant expectancy of attitude which means that we are never very far away from the thought that God is working in us both to will and to do of his good pleasure. He did this, of course, because he believed what he preached. He said continually, "The Son by himself can do nothing," {cf, John 5:19}. Those were not {merely} words; he was not mouthing pious phrases, as we frequently do. He was not trying to make a good impression on those around him. He was saying something that startled them, but he meant it, nevertheless. "The Son by himself can do nothing."

I never get over the amazement at that remarkable statement. Think of the Son of God, the perfect Man, the man who adequately and continually fulfilled all God's expectation for men, who was the constant delight of the Father's heart, who did always those things that pleased Him, and ask yourself, how much did He

personally, as a man, contribute to the mighty program of power and wisdom that occupied three years of ministry? The answer is, nothing -- nothing! He did nothing. "The Son by himself can do nothing." Again and again he declared that to be true. "It is the Father who dwelleth in me, he doeth the works," {John 14:10b KJV}. And out of this conscious, constant sense of need there arose a continuing attitude of prayer, a continuing expectation that if anything was to be done the Father would have to do it. This is what underlay his amazing prayer life, and revealed that to him prayer was an absolute necessity.

Now there is our problem. We have such an unexplainable attitude of self-sufficiency. Oh, there are times when we are conscious of our inadequacy, and our need, and are ready for prayer. Whenever you get down in the dumps, or are up against some circumstance which is tremendously demanding, or have been overwhelmed by some unexpected catastrophe, your first and automatic response is prayer. Why? Because you have a sense of need. You know you need help, and prayer is an automatic response at such times. But we think this is only emergency action reserved for those times when we are in great pressure or strain. For the rest of life we feel quite sufficient. We say, "There are lots of things I can do by myself. I'll pray when I need help, but the rest I can manage on my own." The secret of the life of Jesus is that he never said that, nor even once thought it. He never said to himself, "My training, my background, my knowledge, the ability that God has given to me as a man, make me sufficient for certain things on my own, the rest I'll depend on the Father for." No, he said, "The Son by himself can do nothing." Absolutely nothing!

On one occasion our Lord was addressing a great multitude. As he was speaking, the multitude pressed down to the shore of the lake, and grew to such size that he could no longer easily be seen or heard. He then turned to Peter who was sitting in his boat at the edge of the sea and told him to move out a bit into the lake. Jesus got into the boat, Peter paddled it out a few feet from the shore where the Lord could be seen and heard much better and he continued his address. Imagine how Peter must have reacted to this. At last he was able to do something for his Lord. It was his boat and the Lord was his guest. Peter felt that, at last, he could do something for Christ. The Lord had done so much for him, his heart must have rejoiced at this opportunity to provide something that Christ needed and without which he could not have carried on his ministry. But when our Lord finished his discourse that day and dismissed the crowd he had something further to do with Peter.

He turned to him and said, "Peter, launch out into the deep" {cf, Luke 5:4}, that is, move out into the depths of the lake. When Peter had taken the boat out into the middle of the lake the Lord said to him, "Now, Peter, cast in your net. Lower the nets for a draught. Get ready to fish," {cf, Luke 5:4b}. And Peter looked at the Lord in amazement. You can see the almost incredulous look on his face and hear the patronizing tone in his voice when he said to him, "Lord, we have been fishing all night long and caught nothing," {cf, Luke 5:5}. What he was thinking, unquestionable was something like "Lord, I know you are a great teacher. You certainly know how to speak to men far better than I. You are a mighty man of power, a man of incredible wisdom, you obviously know secrets that we know nothing about, but Lord, when it comes to fishing you're talking to an expert. If you want to know anything about fishing I'll be glad to instruct you. After all, Lord, I have been raised on this lake, all my life. I know where there are fish and where there are none. I know when they bite and I know when they don't. I have been fishing all night long, Lord, and have caught absolutely nothing. Now take my advice, Lord, you stick to your preaching and let me do the fishing."

But the Lord said, "Peter, let down your net for a draught." And something about his tone was irresistible so Peter said "Nevertheless, Lord, at Thy word I will." So he let down the net and enclosed a great host of fish so large that the net began to break as they drew the fish into the boat. As Peter tumbled all these fish into the bottom of the boat and stood there, knee-deep in fish, he looked up at his Lord with painful surprise and said to him, "Lord, depart from me. I am a sinful man," {cf, Luke 5:8}. What did he mean? He meant "Lord, I see what you mean. I see that even in those areas where I think myself to be sufficient I need you."

Surely this is what our Lord is teaching us. This is one thing we must learn, that there is no activity of life which does not require prayer, a sense of expectation of God at work. Is not this what that disciple felt (it may even have been Peter) as he watched our Lord praying? He knew that, to him, prayer was an option. He prayed when he felt like it, he prayed when he thought it necessary, thinking that prayer was designed for emergency use only, for the "big" problems of life. Do we not need to begin right here? This phone call that I am about to make, I can't do it right except in prayer. It will never have the effect it ought to have except as my heart looks up to God and says "Speak through me in this." This letter I am about to write, this part I am

making on the machine, how can I do it right, how can I fulfill my ministry except as I look to thee, Lord, to do it through me. "The Son by himself can do nothing," {cf, John 5:19}. This interview that I am about to conduct, this chart that I have to make for my studies, this report that I must turn in tomorrow, this room that I am sweeping, this walk I am going to take, this game I am about to play. These are the unending needs from which prayer rises.

Someone asked a dear cleaning lady what her method of prayer was, and she said,

"I don't know nothin' about method. I just pray like this: When I wash my clothes, I pray, 'Lord, wash my heart clean.' When I iron them, I say, 'Lord, iron out all those troubles I can't do nothin' about.' When I sweep the floor, I say, 'Lord, sweep all the corners of my life like I'm sweepin' this floor.'"

That is real prayer.

The second thing this disciple saw in Jesus was that prayer was not only necessary, but it was also perfectly natural. There was no struggle on his part to pray. There was no driving of himself. Prayer to him was not an act of self-discipline or duty. It was never duty, it was always delight. Now that does not mean that our Lord did not require time for prayer, nor that he did not have to arrange for prayer in his program. He had to make choices between other demanding things that threatened to usurp his time. Sometimes he spent hours and whole nights in prayer. Occasionally he slipped away when the crowds were the very largest and the most demanding upon him. Luke records in this same Gospel that a great multitude came together to hear him but he withdrew himself to a desert place and prayed.

Certainly there were times when he was weary and pressed and prayer was not the easiest thing to do under the circumstances. That time in Gethsemane's garden he must have been, like the disciples, weary and sleepy, emotionally and physically exhausted, but as they slept, he prayed. Yet it was no apparent problem to our Lord. There was no sense of reluctance or that this was a requirement he had to fulfill. He never seemed to drag himself away from something else to this. Why not? Because, again, his actions arose out of an overwhelming sense of need. He simply faced up to the fact that without this relationship what he did was wasted time. He could put in hours of activity but it accomplished nothing. And out of that deep, urgent sense of continual need, that awareness that he was but an empty channel, a vessel through whom the Father worked, there arose his continual prayer.

This is what we need to come to, isn't it?

We need a sense of need! Offer a sandwich to a man who is stuffed with a heavy dinner and you will have to use all your powers of persuasion to get him to accept it. At that he will only do so out of politeness and as soon as your back is turned he will dispose of it behind the sofa. Why? Because he has no sense of need. Though he may feel a duty to accept it, he does not want it, and it is of no value to him. But try offering a sandwich to a hungry teenage boy. You had better start making another one as soon as he takes the first! So, prayer to Jesus was as necessary as eating, and just as natural.

Sometimes it meant for him thanksgiving. You have such a prayer in Chapter 10 of Luke in Verse 21,

In that same hour he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, "I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes; yea, Father, for such was thy gracious will. All things have been delivered to me by my Father; and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." {Luke 10:21-22 RSV}

He was always giving thanks. He was forever saying, "Thank you, Father. Thank you for the circumstance into which you have brought me, thank you for what you have planned to do about it, thank you for the victory that will be won through these circumstances, thank you for the needs that are being met." As he broke the bread to feed the five thousand he lifted his eyes and said, "Thank you, Father," {cf, Matt 14:19}. At the Last Supper as he gathered with his own in the Upper Room he took the cup and when he had given thanks he

said, "Take, eat," {Matt 26:26, Mark 14:22}. And all through his life prayer was thanksgiving.

Sometimes prayer was seeking counsel from the Father. On the occasion when he was about to choose his disciples we are told he spent all the previous night in prayer. What was he doing? He was seeking and receiving illumination and guidance from the Father. He knew his own wisdom would be inadequate for this task. He simply exposed himself to the divine counsel of the Father, and together they went down the list and talked over every single man. As he talked with the Father about each one there came a conviction to his heart, "this is the one" and when he had finished he chose the twelve, including Judas.

Prayer for Jesus was frequently intercession. We have the great account of it in John 17, that mighty prayer in which he prayed for the entire eleven apostles and through them for the whole church to every succeeding age. "I pray not for the world," he said, "but I pray for these and those who will hear my word through them," {cf, John 17:20}. He prayed for Peter in the hour of his disillusionment and defeat when his world came crashing around his head in the dark, dark night when he denied his Lord and went out and wept bitterly. The Lord had met him before and said, "Peter, I have prayed for thee that thy faith fail not," {Luke 22:32 KJV}. Both Judas and Peter that night denied their Lord but the fundamental difference between Judas and Peter was that Christ had prayed for Peter. He prayed for the little children and made intercession for them with the Father. And finally, his great prayer of intercession was prayed on the bloody cross when his arms were stretched out. He prayed as they hammered the nails home in his flesh, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," {Luke 23:34}.

And then, supremely, prayer was communion to Jesus. He prayed on the Mount of Transfiguration, and, as his disciples watched him, he was suddenly transformed before them. As he was praying, the countenance of his face was altered, and his garments became white and shining. In prayer he was experiencing a communion so rich that the glory of the Father which dwelt within him broke through the tent in which it was hidden. As John says, "We beheld his glory as of the only Begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth," {John 1:14 KJV}.

He prayed in Gethsemane's garden and experienced real communion in an hour of deep anguish of heart ending with an angel coming and strengthening him and upholding him in the midst of the pressures that he faced. Tracing through the prayer life of Jesus we can see what this unnamed disciple saw. It was all so necessary to him, so easy, so natural.

Why do we struggle so, then?

Why are we suddenly so busy when the prayer meeting is brought up? Why do we piously favor prayer in general and devilishly resist it in particular? Perhaps even now the enemy is whispering two very clever things to us about prayer:

1. Is he not saying, to some of us at least, "Of course Jesus prayed like this, but do you expect to live like he did? Do you really think that you can live on the level of the Son of God? Is it not obvious that this kind of living is far beyond you? After all, you are nothing but a simple, ordinary Christian. Here on the Peninsula in 1964, twenty centuries after Jesus prayed, do you think you can pray like this?" Like everything else the devil says to us, that is a filthy lie, because the Lord Jesus says, "As I live by the Father, even so shall you live by me," {cf, John 6:57}. "As the Father has sent me, even so send I you," {cf, John 20:21b}. As he lived by the Father's strength, so we are to live by the Son's strength in exactly the same relationship.
2. Or perhaps the enemy is saying to us, "Well, Jesus prayed as he did because he felt a sense of need continually. It is easy to pray, you know, when you feel need. So whenever you feel needy, then pray. But don't bother unless you feel a sense of need." Again that is a slimy word that sounds very pious indeed but it really embodies what has become a widespread philosophy of prayer, which is, *follow your feelings*. Or, in other words, don't bother to walk by faith. Faith reckons on fact, and the fact that God reveals to us is that, whether we sense need or not, we are needy. Whether we realize it or not, whether we feel sufficient or not, we are insufficient. We are continually needy and we must reckon momentarily, constantly, on the indwelling life of the Lord Jesus within us for strength.

The truth is, as we have been suggesting all along, that we are always in need, whether we feel it or not. When we think that everything is fine, that we need no help from God and that life is under control, we are suffering from a satanic delusion, a fantasy, a soap bubble of imagination which is bound ultimately to burst in slimy confusion. Life is really under control only when our attitude is what Jesus' attitude was, one of continual need and constant expectation. God is always the same, and on that great unshakable rock faith continually rests and continually looks for continual supply. We are to be continually taking, he is forever giving. Giving is his job, ours is to receive.

Prayer then is to be our life and our breath so that no one need urge us to pray anymore than they would urge us to breathe or to eat. We know we must pray.

A week or so ago I was standing in the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D. C., my favorite place in Washington. I read again those amazing words engraved on the walls of the Memorial, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and, on the other side, his Second Inaugural Address. The words of the Second Inaugural came home to me with tremendous impact. It is more like a sermon than a political speech. There are many references in its brief scope to God. It brought to mind that when Lincoln entered the Presidency he was not a Christian. He said so. But as the burdens of that great office devolved upon him and the crushing responsibility and sorrow of the war gripped his heart, he said that at Gettysburg when he went to deliver the address, as he walked among the graves of the soldiers, there burst upon him an awareness of his need of the Savior. Later he gave personal testimony that there it was he became a Christian. Lincoln learned to pray, and for Lincoln the purpose of prayer was not to get God to do man's bidding, but to place man where he might come to see God's purposes and to experience the strength of relying on the everlasting arms. Lincoln left this testimony about prayer. He said, "I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had absolutely no other place to go." In the strength of that continual reliance upon God, he became our nation's greatest president.

Prayer

Father, what can we say in this hour but to cry out as these disciples cried out, "Lord, teach us to pray." Teach us our need. Tear away this veil from our eyes that makes us think we have any adequacy in ourselves. Deliver us from this satanic delusion, this widespread worldly philosophy that our knowledge, our education, our training can provide an adequate background for activity. Give us rather, this conscious sense of dependence, this awareness that nothing that we do will be on any value apart from a dependence upon thee, that which is not gold, silver and precious stones is nothing but wood, hay and stubble. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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