

VII. JESUS CHRIST AN EXAMPLE OF PRAYER

Christ, when He saw that He must die, and that now His time was come, He wore His body out: He cared not, as it were, what became of Him: He wholly spent Himself in preaching all day, and in praying all night, preaching in the temple those terrible parables and praying in the garden such prayers, as the seventeenth of John, and "Thy will be done!" even to a bloody sweat.--Thomas Goodwin.

The Bible record of the life of Jesus Christ gives but a glance of His busy doing, a small selection of His many words, and only a brief record of His great works. But even in this record we see Him as being much in prayer. Even though busy and exhausted by the severe strain and toils of His life, "in the morning a great while before day, he rose up and went out and departed into a desert place, and there prayed." Alone in the desert and in the darkness with God! Prayer filled the life of our Lord while on earth. His life was a constant stream of incense sweet and perfumed by prayer. When we see how the life of Jesus was but one of prayer, then we must conclude that to be like Jesus is to pray like Jesus and is to live like Jesus. A serious life it is to pray as Jesus prayed.

We cannot follow any chronological order in the praying of Jesus Christ. What were His steps of advance and skill in the Divine art of praying we know not. He is in the act of prayer when we find Him at the fords of the Jordan, when the waters of baptism, at the hands of John the Baptist, are upon Him. So passing over the three years of His ministry, when closing the drama of His life in that terrible baptism of fear, pain, suffering, and shame, we find Him in the spirit, and also in the very act of praying. The baptism of the Cross, as well as the baptism of the Jordan, are sanctified by prayer. With the breath of prayer in His last sigh, He commits His spirit to God. In His first recorded utterances, as well as His first acts, we find Him teaching His disciples how to pray as His first lesson, and as their first duty. Under the shadow of the Cross, in the urgency and importance of His last interview with His chosen disciples, He is at the same all-important business, teaching the world's teachers how to pray, trying to make prayerful those lips and hearts out of which were to flow the Divine deposits of truth.

The great eras of His life were created and crowned with prayer. What were His habits of prayer during His stay at home and His toil as a carpenter in Nazareth, we have no means of knowing. God has veiled it, and guess and speculation are not only vain and misleading, but proud and prurient. It would be presumptuous searching into that which God has hidden, which would make us seek to be wise above that which was written, trying to lift up the veil with which God has covered His own revelation.

We find Christ in the presence of the famed, the prophet and the preacher. He has left His Nazareth home and His carpenter shop by God's call. He is now at a transitional point. He has moved out to His great work. John's baptism and the baptism of the Holy Ghost are prefatory and are to qualify Him for that work. This epochal and transitional period is marked by prayer.

"Now when all the people were baptized, it came to pass that Jesus, being also baptized, and praying, the heaven was opened.

"And the Holy Ghost descended in a bodily shape like a dove upon him, and a voice came from heaven, which said, Thou art my beloved Son; in thee I am well pleased."

It is a supreme hour in His history, different and in striking contrast with, but not in opposition to, the past. The descent and abiding of the Holy Spirit in all His fullness, the opening heavens, and the attesting voice which involved God's recognition of His only Son--all these are the result, if not the direct creation and response to His praying on that occasion.

"As He was praying," so we are to be praying. If we would pray as Christ prayed, we must be as Christ was, and must live as Christ lived. The Christ character, the Christ life, and the Christ spirit, must be ours if we would do the Christ praying, and would have our prayers answered as He had His prayers answered. The business of Christ even now in Heaven at His Father's right hand is to pray. Certainly if we are His, if we love Him, if we live for Him, and if we live close to Him, we will catch the contagion of His praying life, both on earth and in Heaven. We will learn His trade and carry on His business on earth.

Jesus Christ loved all men, He tasted death for all men, He intercedes for all men. Let us ask then, are we the imitators, the representatives, and the executors of Jesus Christ? Then must we in our prayers run parallel with His atonement in its extent. The atoning blood of Jesus Christ gives sanctity and efficiency to our prayers. As worldwide, as broad, and as human as the man Christ Jesus was, so must be our prayers. The intercessions of Christ's people must give currency and expedition to the work of Christ, carry the atoning blood to its benignant ends, and help to strike off the chains of sin from every ransomed soul. We must be as praying, as tearful, and as compassionate as was Christ.

Prayer affects all things. God blesses the person who prays. He who prays goes out on a long voyage for God and is enriched himself while enriching others, and is blessed himself while the world is blessed by his praying. To "live a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty" is the wealthiest wealth.

The praying of Christ was real. No man prayed as He prayed. Prayer pressed upon Him as a solemn, all-imperative, all-commanding duty, as well as a royal privilege in which all sweetness was condensed, alluring and absorbing. Prayer was the secret of His power, the law of His life, the inspiration of His toil and the source of His wealth, His joy, His communion and His strength.

To Christ Jesus prayer occupied no secondary place, but was exacting and paramount, a necessity, a life, the satisfying of a restless yearning and a preparation for heavy responsibilities.

Closeting with His Father in counsel and fellowship, with vigour and in deep joy, all this was His praying. Present trials, future glory, the history of His Church, and the struggles and perils of His disciples in all times and to the very end of time--all these things were born and shaped by His praying.

Nothing is more conspicuous in the life of our Lord than prayer. His campaigns were arranged and His victories were gained in the struggles and communion of His all night praying. By prayer He rent the heavens.

Moses and Elijah and the transfiguration glory wait on His praying. His miracles and teaching had their power from the same source. Gethsemane's praying crimsoned Calvary with serenity and glory. His sacerdotal prayer makes the history and hastens the triumph of His Church on earth. What an inspiration and command to pray is the prayer life of Jesus Christ while in this world! What a comment it is on the value, the nature and the necessity of prayer!

The dispensation of the Person of Jesus Christ was a dispensation of prayer. A synopsis of His teaching and practice of prayer was that "Men ought always to pray and not to faint."

As the Jews prayed in the name of their patriarchs and invoked the privileges granted to them by covenant with God; as we have a new Name and a new covenant, more privileged and more powerful and more all-comprehensive, more authoritative and more Divine; and as far as the Son of God is lifted above the patriarchs in divinity, glory and power, by so much should our praying exceed theirs in range of largeness, glory and power of results.

Jesus Christ prayed to God as Father. Simply and directly did He approach God in the charmed and revered circle of the Father. The awful, repelling fear was entirely absent, lost in the supreme confidence of a child.

Jesus Christ crowns His life, His works and His teaching with prayer. How His Father attests His relationship and puts on Him the glory of answered prayer at His Baptism and Transfiguration when all other glories are growing dim in the night which settles on Him! What almighty potencies are in prayer when we are charged and surcharged with but one inspiration and aim! "Father, glorify thy name." This sweetens all, brightens all, conquers all and gets all. "Father, glorify thy name." That guiding star will illumine the darkest night and calm the wildest storm and will make us brave and true. An imperial principle it is. It will make an imperial Christian.

The range and potencies of prayer, so clearly shown by Jesus in life and teaching, but reveal the great purposes of God. They not only reveal the Son in the reality and fullness of His humanity, but also reveal the Father.

Christ prayed as a child. The spirit of a child was found in Him. At the grave of Lazarus "Jesus lifted up His eyes and said, Father." Again we hear Him begin His prayer after this fashion: "In that hour Jesus rejoiced in spirit, and said, I thank thee, O Father." So also on other occasions we find Him in praying addressing God as His Father, assuming the attitude of the child asking something of the Father. What confidence, simplicity and artlessness! What readiness, freeness and fullness of approach are all involved in the spirit of a child! What confiding trust, what assurance, what tender interest! What profound solicitudes, and tender sympathy on the Father's part! What respect deepening into reverence! What loving obedience and grateful emotions glow in the child's heart! What Divine fellowship and royal intimacy! What sacred and sweet emotions! All these meet in the hour of prayer when the child of God meets His Father in Heaven, and when the Father meets His child! We must live as children if we would ask as children. We must act as children if we would pray as children. The spirit of prayer is born of the child spirit.

The profound reverence in this. relation of paternity must forever exclude all lightness, frivolity and pertness, as well as all undue familiarity. Solemnity and gravity become the hour of prayer. It has been well said: "The worshipper who invokes God under the name of Father and realises the gracious and beneficent love of God, must at the same time remember and recognise God's glorious majesty, which is neither annulled nor impaired, but rather supremely intensified through His fatherly love. An appeal to God as Father, if not associated with reverence and homage before the Divine Majesty, would betray a want of understanding of the character of God." And, we might add, would show a lack of the attributes of a child.

Patriarchs and prophets knew something of the doctrine of the Fatherhood of God to God's family. They "saw it afar off, were persuaded of it, and embraced it," but understood it not, in all its fullness, "God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect."

"Behold he prayeth!" was God's statement of wonderment and surprise to the timid Ananias in regard to Saul of Tarsus. "Behold he prayeth!" applied to Christ has in it far more of wonderment and mystery and surprise. He, the Maker of all worlds, the Lord of angels and of men, co-equal and co-eternal with the Everlasting God; the "brightness of the Father's glory and the express image of his person"; "fresh from his Father's glory and from his Father's throne."--"Behold he prayeth!" To find Him in lowly, dependent attitude of prayer, the suppliant of all suppliants, His richest legacy and His royal privilege to pray--this is the mystery of all mysteries, the wonder of all wonders.

Paul gives in brief and comprehensive statement the habit of our Lord in prayer in Hebrews 5:7--"Who, in the days of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications, with strong crying and tears, unto him that was able to save him from death, and was heard in that he feared." We have in this description of our Lord's praying the outgoing of great spiritual forces. He prayed with "prayers and supplications." It was no formal, tentative effort. He was intense, personal and real. He was a pleader for God's good. He was in great need and He must cry with "strong cryings," made stronger still by His tears. In an agony the Son of God wrestled. His praying was no playing a mere part. His soul was engaged, and all His powers were taxed to a strain. Let us pause and look at Him and learn how to pray in earnest. Let us learn how to win in an agony of prayer that which seems to be withholden from us. A beautiful word is that, "feared," which occurs only twice in the New Testament, the fear of God.

Jesus Christ was always a busy man with His work, but never too busy to pray. The divinest of business filled His heart and filled His hands, consumed His time, exhausted His nerves. But with Him even God's work must not crowd out God's praying. Saving people from sin or suffering must not, even with Christ, be substituted for praying, nor abate in the least the time or the intensity of these holiest of seasons. He filled the day with working for God; He employed the night with praying to God. The day-working made the night-praying a necessity. The night-praying sanctified and made successful the day-working. Too busy to pray gives religion Christian burial, it is true, but kills it nevertheless.

In many cases only the bare fact, yet important and suggestive fact, is stated that He prayed. In other cases the very words which came out of

His heart and fell from His lips are recorded. The man of prayer by pre-eminence was Jesus Christ. The epochs of His life were created by prayer, and all the minor details outlines and inlines of His life were inspired, coloured and impregnated by prayer.

The prayer words of Jesus were sacred words. By them God speaks to God, and by them God is revealed and prayer is illustrated and enforced. Here is prayer in its purest form and in its mightiest potencies. It would seem that earth and heaven would uncover head and open ears most wide to catch the words of His praying who was truest God and truest man, and divinest of suppliants, who prayed as never man prayed. His prayers are our inspiration and pattern to pray.