

VIII. PRAYER INCIDENTS IN THE LIFE OF OUR LORD

There was a great cape at the south of Africa and so many storms and so much loss of life until it was called the Cape of Death. One day in 1789 a bold navigator shoved the prow of his vessel into the storms that thundered around it and found a calm sea. He then named it the Cape of Good Hope. So there is a cape that jutted out from earth into the sea of eternity called death. All were afraid of it. All navigators, sooner or later, must contend with these murky waters. But once upon a time, nearly two thousand years ago, a brave navigator from heaven came and drove the prow of His frail humanity bark down into the gloomy waters of this cape and lay under its awful power for three days. Emerging therefrom, He found it to be the door to endless calm and joy, and now we call it Good Hope.--John W. Baker

One of Christ's most impassioned and sublime pœans of prayer and praise is found recorded by both Matthew and Luke, with small verbal contrasts and with some diversity of detail and environments. He is reviewing the poor results of His ministry and remarking upon the feeble responses of man to God's vast outlay of love and mercy. He is arraigning the ingratitude of men to God, and is showing the fearfully destructive results of their indifference with their increased opportunities, favours and responsibilities.

In the midst of these arraignments, denunciations and woes, the seventy disciples return to report the results of their mission. They were full of exhilaration at their success, and evinced it with no little self-gratulation. The spirit of Jesus was diverted, relieved and refreshed by their animation, catching somewhat the contagion of their joy, and sharing in their triumph. He rejoiced, gave thanks, and prayed a prayer wonderful for its brevity, its inspiration and its revelation:

"In that hour Jesus rejoiced in spirit, and said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of Heaven and earth, that thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes: even so, Father; for so it seemed good in thy sight.

"All things are delivered to me of my Father; and no man knoweth who the Son is, but the Father; and who the Father is, but the Son, and he to whom the Son will reveal him,"

The Christ life was in the image of His Father. He was the "express image of His person." And so the spirit of prayer with Christ was to do God's will. His constant asseveration was that He "came to do His Father's will," and not His own will. When the fearful crisis came in His life in Gethsemane, and all its darkness, direness and dread, with the crushing weight of man's sins and sorrows which were pressing down upon Him, His spirit and frame crushed, and almost expiring, then He cried out for relief, yet it was not His will which was to be followed. It was only an appeal out of weakness and death for God's relief in God's way. God's will was to be the law and the rule of His relief, if relief came.

So he who follows Christ in prayer must have God's will as his law, his rule and his inspiration. In all praying, it is the man who prays. The life and the character flow into the closet. There is a mutual action and reaction. The closet has much to do with making the character, while the character has much to do with making the closet. It is "the effectual fervent prayer of the righteous man which availeth much." It

is with them who "call upon the Lord out of a pure heart" we are to consort. Christ was the greatest of prayers because He was the holiest of men. His character is the praying character. His spirit is the life and power of prayer. He is not the best prayer who has the greatest fluency, the most brilliant imagination, the richest gifts, and the most fiery ardour, but he who has imbibed most of the spirit of Christ.

It is he whose character is the nearest to a facsimile of Christ. His prayer referred to just named, in the form of thanksgiving, sets forth the characters upon whom God's power is bestowed and to whom God's person and will are revealed. "Hid these things from the wise and prudent," those, for instance, who are wise in their own eyes, skilled in letters, cultured, learned, philosophers, scribes, doctors, rabbis--"prudent"--one who can put things together, having insight, comprehension, expression. God's revelation of Himself and His will cannot be sought out and understood by reason, intelligence nor great learning. Great men and great minds are neither the channels nor depositories of God's revelation by virtue of their culture, braininess nor wisdom. God's system in redemption and providence is not to be thought out, open only to the learned and wise. The learned and the wise, following their learning and their wisdom, have always sadly and darkly missed God's thoughts and God's ways.

The condition of receiving God's revelation and of holding God's truth is one of the heart, not one of the head. The ability to receive and search out is like that of the child, the babe, the synonym of docility, innocence and simplicity. These are the conditions on which God reveals Himself to men. The world by wisdom cannot know God. The world by wisdom can never receive nor understand God, because God reveals Himself to men's hearts, not to their heads. Only hearts can ever know God, can feel God, can see God, and can read God in His Book of Books. God is not grasped by thought but by feeling. The world gets God by revelation, not by philosophy. It is not apprehension, the mental ability to grasp God, but plasticity, ability to be impressed, that men need. It is not by hard, strong, stern, great reasoning that the world gets God or gets hold of God, but by big, soft, pure hearts. Not so much do men need light to see God as they need hearts to feel God.

Human wisdom, great natural talents, and the culture of the schools, howsoever good they may be, can neither be the repositories nor conservors of God's revealed truth. The tree of knowledge has been the bane of faith, ever essaying to reduce revelation to a philosophy and to measure God by man. In its pride, it puts God out and puts men into God's truth. To become babes again, on our mother's bosom, quieted, weaned, without clamour or protest, is the only position in which to know God. A calmness on the surface, and in the depths of the soul, in which God can mirror His will, His Word and Himself--this is the attitude toward Him through which He can reveal Himself, and this attitude is the right attitude of prayer.

Our Lord taught us the lesson of prayer by putting into practice in His life what He taught by His lips. Here is a simple but important statement, full of meaning; "And when he had sent the multitudes away, he went up into a mountain apart to pray: and when the evening was come He was there alone."

The multitudes had been fed and were dismissed by our Lord.

The Divine work of healing and teaching must be stayed awhile in order that time, place and opportunity for prayer might be secured,--Prayer, the divinest of all labour, the most important of all ministries. Away from the eager, anxious, seeking multitudes, He has gone while the day is yet bright, to be alone with God. The multitudes tax and exhaust Him, The disciples are tossed on the sea, but calmness reigns on the mountain top where our Lord is kneeling in secret prayer--where prayer rules. "When Jesus therefore perceived that they would come and take him by force, to make him a king, he departed again into a mountain alone."

He must be alone in that moment with God. Temptation was in that hour. The multitude had feasted on the five loaves and the two fishes. Filled with food and excited beyond measure, they would fain make Him king. He flees from the temptation to secret prayer, for here is the source of His strength to resist evil. What a refuge was secret prayer even to Him! What a refuge to us from the world's dazzling and delusive crowns! What safety there is to be alone with God when the world tempts us, allures us, attracts us!

The prayers of our Lord were prophetic and illustrative of the great truth that the greatest measure of the Holy Spirit, the attesting voice and opening Heavens are only secured by prayer. This is suggested by His baptism by John the Baptist, when He prayed as He was baptised, and immediately the Holy Spirit descended upon Him like a dove. More than prophetic and illustrative is this hour to Him. This critical hour is real and personal, consecrating and qualifying Him for God's highest purposes. Prayer to Him, just as it is to us, was a necessity, an absolute, invariable condition of securing God's fullest, consecrating and qualifying power. The Holy Spirit came upon Him in fullness of measure and power in the very act of prayer.

And so the Holy Spirit comes upon us in fullness of measure and power only in answer to ardent and intense praying. The heavens were opened to Christ, and access and communion established and enlarged by prayer. Freedom and fullness of access and closeness of communion are secured to us as the heritage of prayer. The voice attesting His Sonship came to Christ in prayer. The witness of our sonship, clear and indubitable, is secured only by praying. The constant witness of our sonship can only be retained by those who pray without ceasing. When the stream of prayer is shallow and arrested, the evidence of our sonship becomes faint and inaudible.