

IX. PRAYER INCIDENTS IN THE LIFE OF OUR LORD (Continued)

Sin is so unspeakably awful in its evil that it struck down, as to death and hell, the very Son of God Himself. He had been amazed enough at sin before. He had seen sin making angels of heaven into devils of hell. Death and all its terrors did not much move or disconcert our Lord. No. It was not death: It was sin. It was hell-fire in His soul. It was the coals, and the oil, and the rosin, and the juniper, and the turpentine of the fire that is not quenched.--Alexander Whyte, D.D.

We note that from the revelation and inspiration of a transporting prayer-hour of Christ, as its natural sequence, there sounds out that gracious encouraging proclamation for heavy-hearted, restless, weary souls of earth, which has so impressed, arrested and drawn humanity as it has fallen on the ears of heavy-laden souls, which has so sweetened and relieved men of their toils and burdens:

"Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

"Take my yoke upon you, and lean of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.

"For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

At the grave of Lazarus and as preparatory to and as a condition of calling him back to life, we have our Lord calling upon His Father in Heaven. "Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me, and I know that thou hearest me always." The lifting to Heaven of Christ's eyes--how much was there in it! How much of confidence and plea was in that look to Heaven! His very look, the lifting up of His eyes, carried His whole being Heavenward, and caused a pause in that world, and drew attention and help. All Heaven was engaged, pledged and moved when the Son of God looked up at this grave. O for a people with the Christly eye, Heaven lifted and Heaven arresting! As it was with Christ, so ought we to be so perfected in faith, so skilled in praying, that we could lift our eyes to Heaven and say with Him, with deepest humility, and with commanding confidence, "Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me."

Once more we have a very touching and beautiful and instructive incident in Christ's praying, this time having to do with infants in their mothers' arms, parabolic as well as historical:

"Then were there brought unto him little children, that he should put his hands on them, and pray: and the disciples rebuked them.

"But when Jesus saw it he was much displeased, and said unto them, Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not; for of such is the kingdom of God.

"Verily I say unto you, whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein.

"And he took them up in his arms, put his hands upon them and blessed them."

This was one of the few times when stupid ignorance and unspiritual views aroused His indignation and displeasure. Vital principles were involved. The foundations were being destroyed, and worldly views

actuated the disciples. Their temper and their words in rebuking those who brought their infants to Christ were exceedingly wrong. The very principles which He came to illustrate and propagate were being violated. Christ received the little ones. The big ones must become little ones. The old ones must become young ones ere Christ will receive them. Prayer helps the little ones. The cradle must be invested with prayer. We are to pray for our little ones. The children are now to be brought to Jesus Christ by prayer, as He is in Heaven and not on earth. They are to be brought to Him early for His blessing, even when they are infants. His blessing descends upon these little ones in answer to the prayers of those who bring them. With untiring importunity are they to be brought to Christ in earnest, persevering prayer by their fathers and mothers. Before they know, themselves, anything about coming of their own accord, parents are to present them to God in prayer, seeking His blessing upon their offspring and at the same time asking for wisdom, for grace and Divine help to rear them that they may come to Christ when they arrive at the years of accountability of their own accord.

Holy hands and holy praying have much to do with guarding and training young lives and to form young characters for righteousness and Heaven. What benignity, simplicity, kindness, unworldliness and condescension and meekness, linked with prayerfulness, are in this act of this Divine Teacher!

It was as Jesus was praying that Peter made that wonderful confession of his faith that Jesus was the Son of God:

"And it came to pass, as he was alone praying, his disciples were with him; and he asked them, saying, Whom say the people that I am?

"And they said, Some say that thou art John the Baptist; some, Elias; and others, Jeremias or one of the prophets.

"He saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am?

"And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.

"And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-Jona; for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven.

"And I say also unto thee, that thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church: and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

"And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of Heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

It was after our Lord had made large promises to His disciples that He had appointed unto each of them a kingdom, and that they should sit at His table in His kingdom and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel, that He gave those words of warning to Simon Peter, telling him that He had prayed for Peter. "And the Lord said, Simon, Simon, behold Satan hath desired to have you, so that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for thee that thy faith fail not. And when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren."

Happy Peter, to have such an one as the Son of God to pray for him! Unhappy Peter, to be so in the toils of Satan as to demand so much of Christ's solicitude! How intense are the demands upon our prayers for some specific cases! Prayer must be personal in order to be to the fullest extent beneficial. Peter drew on Christ's praying more than any other disciple because of his exposure to greater perils, Pray for the most impulsive, the most imperilled ones by name. Our love and their danger give frequency, inspiration, intensity and personality to praying.

We have seen how Christ had to flee from the multitude after the magnificent miracle of feeding the five thousand as they sought to make Him king. Then prayer was His escape and His refuge from this strong worldly temptation. He returns from that night of prayer with strength and calmness, and with a power to perform that other remarkable miracle of great wonder of walking on the sea.

Even the loaves and fishes were sanctified by prayer before He served them to the multitude. "He looked up to Heaven and gave thanks." Prayer should sanctify our daily bread and multiply our seed sown.

He looked up to heaven and heaved a sigh when He touched the tongue of the deaf man who had an impediment in his speech. Much akin was this sigh to that groaning in spirit which He evinced at the grave of Lazarus. "Jesus therefore again groaning in himself, cometh to the grave." Here was the sigh and groan of the Son of God over a human wreck, groaning that sin and hell had such a mastery over man; troubled that such a desolation and ruin were man's sad inheritance. This is a lesson to be ever learned by us. Here is a fact ever to be kept in mind and heart and which must ever, in some measure, weigh upon the inner spirits of God's children. We who have received the first fruit of the Spirit groan within ourselves at sin's waste, and death, and are filled with longings for the coming of a better day.

Present in all great praying, making and marking it, is the man. It is impossible to separate the praying from the man. The constituent elements of the man are the constituents of his praying. The man flows through his praying. Only the fiery Elijah could do Elijah's fiery praying. We can get holy praying only from a holy man. Holy being can never exist without holy doing. Being is first, doing comes afterward. What we are gives being, force and inspiration to what we do. Character, that which is graven deep, ineradicably, imperishably within us, colours all we do.

The praying of Christ, then, is not to be separated from the character of Christ. If He prayed more unweariedly, more self-denyingly, more holily, more simply and directly than other men, it was because these elements entered more largely into His character than into that of others.

The transfiguration marks another epoch in His life, and that was pre-eminently a prayer epoch. Luke gives an account with the animus and aim of the event:

"And it came to pass about an eight days after these sayings, he took Peter and John and James, and went up into a mountain to pray.

"And as he prayed, the fashion of his countenance was altered, and his

raiment was white and glistening.

"And, behold, there talked with him two men, which were Moses and Elias:

"Who appeared in glory, and spake of his decease which he should accomplish at Jerusalem."

The selection was made of three of His disciples for an inner circle of associates, in prayer. Few there be who have the spiritual tastes or aptitude for this inner circle. Even these three favoured ones could scarcely stand the strain of that long night of praying. We know that He went up on that mountain to pray, not to be transfigured. But it was as He prayed, the fashion of His countenance was altered and His raiment became white and glistening. There is nothing like prayer to change character and whiten conduct. There is nothing like prayer to bring heavenly visitants and to gild with heavenly glory earth's mountain to us, dull and drear. Peter calls it the holy mount, made so by prayer.

Three times did the voice of God bear witness to the presence and person of His Son, Jesus Christ--at His baptism by John the Baptist, and then at His transfiguration the approving, consoling and witnessing voice of His Father was heard. He was found in prayer both of these times. The third time the attesting voice came, it was not on the heights of His transfigured glory, nor was it as He was girding Himself to begin His conflict and to enter upon His ministry, but it was when He was hastening to the awful end. He was entering the dark mystery of His last agony, and looking forward to it. The shadows were deepening, a dire calamity was approaching and an unknown and untried dread was before Him. Ruminating on His approaching death, prophesying about it, and forecasting the glory which would follow, in the midst of His high and mysterious discourse, the shadows come like a dread eclipse and He bursts out in an agony of prayer:

"Now is my soul troubled; and what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour: but for this cause came I unto this hour.

"Father, glorify thy name. Then came there a voice from heaven, saying, I have both glorified it and will glorify it again.

"The people therefore that stood by, and heard it, said that it thundered: others said, An angel spoke to him.

"Jesus answered and said, This voice came not because of me, but for your sakes."

But let it be noted that Christ is meeting and illuminating this fateful and distressing hour with prayer. How even thus early the flesh reluctantly shrank from the contemplated end!

How fully does His prayer on the cross for His enemies synchronise with all He taught about love to our enemies, and with mercy and forgiveness to those who have trespassed against us! "Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do," Apologising for His murderers and praying for them, while they were jeering and mocking Him at His death pains and their hands were reeking with His blood! What amazing generosity, pity and love!

Again, take another one of the prayers on the cross. How touching the prayer and how bitter the cup! How dark and desolate the hour as He exclaims, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" This is the last stroke that rends in twain His heart, more exquisite in its bitterness and its anguish and more heart-piercing than the kiss of Judas. All else was looked for, all else was put in His book of sorrows. But to have His Father's face withdrawn, God-forsaken, the hour when these distressing words escaped the lips of the dying Son of God! And yet how truthful He is! How childlike we find Him! And so when the end really comes, we hear Him again speaking to His Father: "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit. And having said this, he gave up the ghost."