

The Lord Jesus Christ

The supreme example of prayer

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THE BIRTH of the Lord Jesus Christ was heralded by centuries of prayer. The faithful in every age had been praying for the promised Coming One. In the final years before the fullness of time arrived, we are told that “the people were in expectation, and all men mused in their hearts of John, whether he were the Christ, or not” (Lk. 3:15). Many must have pondered the Seventy Weeks Prophecy in Daniel 9:24 and made it a matter of earnest prayer. Simeon, who took the child Christ in his arms, and Anna, the aged widow and prophetess, were numbered amongst the faithful waiting remnant whilst fervent prayers ascended to the throne on high.

And the angels

There were heavenly waiters, too. Angels had been wondering about the words of Michael the archangel to Daniel (9:24), and the messages of the many prophets who had spoken of the Servant who would come and would suffer and die. It is no wild imagination to think about Bible classes amongst the angels as they searched “what, or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them [the prophets] did signify, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow” (1 Pet. 1:10,11).

The angels were waiting for Christ. When one of their number was sent to Mary and then to Joseph to make known the great news about the choice by the Father of Mary the maid of Galilee to be the mother of the Son of God, there must have been joyful stirrings of hearts and much praise.

The two women

And what of Mary and Elisabeth? Surely never before had two women been in such constant prayer about their promised babies, one of them about the Son of God and the other about his illustrious forerunner. Their urgings in labour must have been mightily strengthened by the longing to see their precious offspring.

The child Jesus

We are not told about the very first prayer uttered by Jesus. Mary was a woman of prayer, and her prayers can but be imagined as she nursed her little one and sang to him the songs of Zion. Babies in Israel were weaned when they were three years old and more. Thus Mary’s songs were musical lessons, and Jesus was a good and eager pupil.

Scripture portrays Jesus thinking about Mary’s lessons and saying to his Father, “Thou didst make me hope when I was upon my mother’s breasts” (Ps. 22:9). Every sister-mother should take careful note and imitate Mary in teaching her own babies.

The inspired Prayer Book

The book of Psalms is the best Christadelphian hymn book. It was Christ’s prayer book. There he could discover the model on which to build his meditation, instruction and personal prayers. There he could see his Father at work and hear Him breathing out the words of priceless counsel. There was comfort and assurance to read that His Father called him, “My Son” (2:7).

How often did Jesus pray?

It is a pointless question. Every child likes to feel that his father is always accessible. Every father should long for a complete understanding between himself and his son. The door to this understanding must always be open. The notice ‘Do not disturb’ never appears on God’s door. Victorian fathers were often remote and ‘laid down the law’. Children were expected to be seen and not heard when father was busy in his own life. But God was not such a Father to Jesus.

What was life like for Jesus?

He was brought up in a humble Jewish home and was taught to honour his mother and his foster-father, Joseph. Though we know but little of Joseph, we do know that he instructed Jesus in the craft of carpentry. Synagogue life would be well known in the village, and the law and

the prophets would be read and instruction would be in the hands of the Levites, the priests and parents.

There was a special bond between Mary and Jesus. Even so, from early childhood it would become clear that Jesus had a great deal of 'otherness' about him. His perception of things spiritual was remarkable. He absorbed the Word of God and understood it in ways by which worship and prayer at home would be full of surprises for Mary and Joseph. For Jesus, God, though certainly highly exalted, was not remote and elsewhere, but everywhere present in everything.

His stepbrothers and sisters must have found Jesus strangely challenging and profoundly different. When Joseph died, Jesus would have become a pillar of strength for Mary. She and Jesus would surely have talked often one to another. Her knowledge of God's Word and his knowledge of God would blend wonderfully together, and yet give her cause to seek to retain and understand more of what her remarkable son was saying.

A beautiful prayer

Luke records a unique prayer of Jesus. The seventy disciples had recently returned from their spectacular missionary journey, and we read: "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" (10:21).

This prayer was an outpouring of joy. There is nothing over-familiar in the Lord's choice of words. His Father was Lord of heaven and earth. So is ours, and we have even less cause to be familiar, trite or easy-going with our words. Neither is it eloquence that makes prayer acceptable. The heart must speak in humility and with faith.

A briefing every day?

All of us have pondered how the Lord God spoke to His Son. We are not told. But there are gleanings to be garnered from some of the things said by Jesus. For example, when Jesus stood before the tomb of Lazarus, he said, "Father, I thank Thee that Thou hast heard me. And I knew that Thou hearest me always" (Jno. 11:41,42).

That resurrection was accomplished by prayer and faith in God. Indeed, every word and deed

were the result of total dependence upon his Father. Maybe the Lord knew beforehand much of every day before it happened. This is holy ground, and we do well to tread carefully and seek not to be wise in our own conceits. The private communings 'twixt Father and Son and the Son and his Father are for the most part beyond our range of hearing.

Jesus knew each of the twelve apostles better than he knew himself; but the choice of the twelve men was the Father's choice. Jesus did not rely only on his own knowledge, whether or not this was inspired knowledge. The Father was to be honoured above all else.

Crucial times

The final stepping stones to Calvary carried our Saviour above the treacherous turbulence of his enemies in high places, and, painfully, through the bewilderment of the twelve when the waters were too deep for them. Nevertheless, he was deeply concerned about the forthcoming experiences for them. He prayed for them. His foreknowledge of Peter's denial was as painful for the Master as it was for Peter. Though Peter's cocksureness blinded him at the time, the Lord's prayer for him was a wondrous eyesalve for the days to come.

The Lord's prayer as he took each man's feet in the towel at the time of washing included Judas, but there was no one to plead the cause of the One whose feet were to be pierced. Surely the towel is still there in the High Priest's hands as he ministers for us in prayer, though he is now in heaven. He prepares each of us for our forthcoming trials. Every faithful saint can still hear the words and know them to be true for him: "I have prayed for thee". Let us take heart, and have courage.

Prayer beyond our understanding

We have been considering Jesus as an example of prayer. Time and again we have been out of our depth. There are few of us who can truly understand what it is to spend a whole night in prayer, or to be almost totally misunderstood by others, or to have boundless power and not make use of it to save oneself in dire extremities. We have not sat at table with him and heard him give thanks, though we have some knowledge of that. Later, in remembrance of that solemn time, the disciples must have trembled and wept that they had heard the Lord giving thanks for his sacrifice.

At the Last Supper the Lord prayed. Paul, by the Spirit, tells us something that is almost impossible for us to understand: "the Lord Jesus the same night in which he was betrayed . . . [gave] thanks" (1 Cor. 11:23,24). We are so used to hearing the reading Sunday after Sunday that the awesome wonder of the words escapes us. He gave thanks for the bread and the wine which represented his life and his death. Each week we give thanks looking back over nineteen hundred years. The Lord gave thanks the day before he died, and in a deep sense he gave thanks for his death.

This is prayer of an extraordinary kind. The aged Simeon with the child Jesus in his arms prayed in faith for his own death, saying: "Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace, according to Thy word" (Lk. 2:29). When Jesus prayed he was within three days of immortality; Simeon prayed with that glorious but distant prospect as the basis of his faith.

Gethsemane

In the dappled shade of the olive garden Christ led the eleven to the place where he would keep his tryst with the Father. The place was familiar to the apostles, because they had often been there with their Lord, and doubtless it was a regular place of prayer for him, and probably for them.

But this night it was different. Eight of the disciples were posted nearby with the words, "Sit ye here, while I go and pray yonder" (Mt. 26:36). Peter, James and John accompanied Christ to a place further within the garden. The Lord's mind was greatly exercised, and coming to a place a stone's throw from the faithful three he cast himself prostrate in prayer to his Father.

The shadow and glory of Calvary lay upon his heart with an indescribable weight of sorrow and stress. His mission of redemption drove him willingly onward, but the forthcoming shame and torture would finally close his eyes in three days' separation from his Father.

Gethsemane, the olive press, was bringing forth oil for the Light of the World. The threefold prayer of Christ in Gethsemane to his Father is amongst the most intense, deep and fruitful of all the prayers of Scripture. It moved from, "if it be possible, let this cup pass from me", to the unreserved and unqualified, "Thy will be done" (vv. 39-42). This was accomplished by three separate hours of agonising prayer, in which, as it were, Christ becomes prayer.

It was during this time that an angel came and ministered to him. We do not know what the angel said or did, but he accomplished the Father's wish to comfort and strengthen His Son to bear the unimaginable load that rested on his willing shoulders. There is a sense in which Calvary's tree was carried in the garden.

The transformation

The Christ who entered Gethsemane was heavily laden with his redemptive burden. He cast himself down prayerfully, as though saying, 'Now is my soul troubled'. The sweat of his brow was blood-like as it fell to the ground in the garden. In Eden came the curse, "in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread". By Gethsemane's blessing we eat bread week by week.

The Jesus who entered Gethsemane's garden was not the one who left it. The burdened and distressed man had been mightily transformed by three hours of prayer and the companionship of the angel. He emerged from amongst the olive trees with the words, "Rise, let us be going" (Mt. 26:46). He met the armed mob led by Judas. They came to arrest a man whom they discovered was almost regal in his appearance and in complete charge of everything. They fell backwards to the ground, not once, but twice, and, as a lamb before his shearers, he was led silently away.

Who was the judge?

Things were not as they appeared to be. Caiaphas and Pilate were the ones before whom Christ was arraigned, but in fact what they did was judged by him. But above all, the Lord God was the Judge, and they will be judged at the judgment seat of Christ when he returns. Meanwhile, in Calvary, the Lord looked for some to take pity, and for comforters, but there were none (Ps. 22:31). He had prayed for the soldiers about their grisly task (Just doing my duty, sir).

The women looked from afar, aghast, distraught and weeping; Jesus had asked for a drink, and he received it from a sponge on a hyssop reed (one of the Passover herbs). Out of his relieved and dying throat came the dreadful words, "It is finished" (Jno. 19:30). The work his Father had given him to do had been wholly done. The psalm had recorded the words, "He hath done this" (69:20). These words Bullinger translates, "It is finished". Gethsemane had been the Father and Son at work in our Lord's almost last prayer, to which Calvary had been the long Amen.

Prayer in the ministry of Jesus

"Now when all the people were baptized, it came to pass, that Jesus also being baptized, and praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy [Spirit] 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" (Lk. 3:21,22);

". . . and great multitudes came together to hear, and to be healed by him of their infirmities. And he withdrew himself into the wilderness, and prayed" (5:15,16);

"And it came to pass in those days, that he went out into a mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God. And when it was day, he called unto him his disciples: and of them he chose twelve, whom also he named apostles" (6:12,13);

"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?" (9:18);

"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" (vv. 28,29).

The final moment

The Man of Prayer made a last petition with his final, fleeting breath: "into Thy hands I commend my spirit" (Lk. 23:46). The Father Who had given the first breath to the newly formed Adam took into His safekeeping the precious life breath of the Second Adam, the finest man who had ever lived, who was truly in the image of his Father.

There was a wonderful moment still to come. There is a psalm that tells of man's urgent prayers when in distress, and his need to remember when his vows have been answered: "I will go into Thy house with burnt offerings: I will pay Thee my vows, which my lips have uttered, and my mouth hath spoken, when I was in trouble" (66:13,14). It is easy to forget. A corresponding verse in the New Testament asks, "but where are the nine?". Only one healed leper out of the ten returned to give thanks and to glorify God (Lk. 17:17).

Resurrection morning

The Lord died in faith, and was awakened by his Father to everlasting joy. It is pleasing to read appropriate words from the same psalm from which the Lord took his dying prayer, this time in true recognition of the blessedness of his resurrection: "Thou hast redeemed me, O LORD God of truth" (31:5).

The grave-clothes and the head-wrapping were monuments of the past, never to be worn again. Surely the Lord praised and glorified his Father, maybe with the two angels near at hand and the numberless heavenly host waiting to attend him when he entered the Father's presence.

"We have such an high priest"

The work of prayer still goes on. It is ceaseless, and has already occupied two thousand years. The Son is at the Father's right hand on behalf of the living saints. John was inspired to write: "we have an advocate with the Father" (1 Jno. 2:1). He is an immortal High Priest, "a priest for ever", one "made . . . after the power of an endless life" (Heb. 7:16,17). His arms will never tire, as did Moses' arms at Rephidim. He is ever ready to hear our prayers and to speak for us in heaven. We are indeed a privileged people. We should imitate him in praying for others, for our homes, our ecclesias and our Brotherhood worldwide.

It is a worthy practice to pray before we attend our meetings and in the silent time before each occasion starts. It is good to pray on our pillow before rising in the morning and to close our eyes in prayer at the end of the day. For those who have disturbed sleep, each awakening is another moment in which to turn to God in praise and thankfulness. We are never alone.

Our hope

Prayer is likely to miss the mark if we find ourselves always at the centre. God is not in orbit around us; we should be in orbit around Him and His Son and around the hope of Israel. Now is our salvation nearer than when we first believed. All of us have passed milestones since then, whether few or many. The signposts are still marked, 'Onwards to the Kingdom'. If, through age, frail health, or tiredness on the way, we find ourselves faltering, let us remember the times, and the men and women of old, and seek to press onwards, like the aged Daniel, or Jeremiah, or Abraham and Sarah.