

The Prayer-Filled Life of Jesus

For Jesus, to live was to pray. His life was shaped by prayer, steeped in prayer to an extraordinary degree. It is tremendously revealing to read through the Gospels and take note of all the times that Jesus drew aside into solitude, or joined with others in prayer and worship, or turned his eyes and heart to heaven in silent or open prayer. We quickly discover that at all the most significant moments of his life, Jesus sought to dwell in the presence of God his loving Father.

At the very beginning of his public ministry Jesus was baptized in the Jordan river by John the Baptist; Luke tells us that it was “as he was praying [that] heaven was opened,” so that he could experience a powerful and affirming revelation of his Father’s love (Luke 3:21). Before appointing the twelve apostles who would become his constant companions for three years, “Jesus went out to a mountain side to pray” (Luke 6:12). These same apostles would soon discover that accompanying Jesus meant embracing a life immersed in God’s presence, and would become thirsty to learn more for themselves. “One day Jesus was praying in a certain place,” Luke tells us, “when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Lord, teach us to pray . . .’” (Luke 11:1). In response to this request, Jesus taught them the Lord’s Prayer—words which have shaped and guided the prayer of millions of Christians now for almost twenty centuries.

A crucial hinge in the narrative of the first three Gospels comes when Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do you say I am?” (Matt 16:13-20, Mark 8:27-30, Luke 9:18-27). It was this question that led to Peter’s confession of faith in Jesus as the Messiah, and seems to have triggered Jesus’ long and difficult road to the cross. And Luke carefully notes that Jesus prepared for this moment by drawing nearer to his Father: “When Jesus was praying in private and the disciples were with him, he asked them . . . Who do you say I am?” (see Luke 9:18). On another occasion, Jesus “took Peter, John, and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray” (Luke 9:28), and as he prayed he was transformed before them, shining with a glorious light that broke through from heaven as Moses and Elijah came to encourage him, and as his Father reaffirmed the words heard at his baptism.

Jesus frequently retired to silent places to seek God, especially when the press of the crowd seemed to threaten to drown out that still, small voice to which he was ever attentive. At the beginning of his ministry, after a night spent healing crowds of people in Capernaum, Jesus keenly sought the Divine Center: “Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed” (Mark 1:35). That pattern was to repeat itself



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frequently over the coming years. “He went up a mountainside by himself to pray” (Matt 14:23). “After leaving [the crowd], he went up on a mountainside to pray” (Mark 6:46). “One of those days, Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God” (Luke 6:12). Seeking solitude and prayer was not unusual for Jesus, noted Luke; it was characteristic and frequent: “Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed” (Luke 5:16).

But for Jesus, prayer was also something to be shared in community. “[Jesus] went up to Nazareth, where he had been brought up,” writes Luke, describing the earliest days of Jesus’ ministry, “and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom” (Luke 4:16). Many of Jesus’ encounters, healings, and conversations take place in synagogues, where he so often joined with others for worship and prayer. The Gospels also show Jesus praying the traditional blessings before and during meals; we find him blessing God before breaking the few small loaves that would feed the great multitude (Matt 14:19), and again during the Passover meal he shared with his disciples in the upper room (Matt 26:26). I’m always fascinated by Luke’s story about the two disciples who encountered Jesus after his resurrection, but failed to recognize him during the long walk to Emmaus. As he turned to prayer over the meal, though, they instantly knew him (Luke 24:13-35). It is striking that Jesus was most recognizable when he was praying—how I wish the same could be said of me!

Jesus also participated in the worship offered in the temple in Jerusalem. His parents encouraged these pilgrimages from the beginning, as Luke reminds us: “When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord” (Luke 2:22). And on this occasion, of course, they find themselves comforted and challenged by the prophets Simeon and Anna. The only story we have of Jesus’ childhood concerns a family visit to the temple (Luke 2:41-50). So it is hardly surprising that we later find Jesus in those holy precincts: celebrating Passover (John 2:13), marking the Feast of Tabernacles (John 7:1-10), and, of course, travelling to the great city

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for the climactic week leading to the cross and empty tomb. It was during those tumultuous days that Jesus swept through the temple courts, driving out the merchants and money-changers ("My house will be called a house of prayer!" was the cry on his lips; see Matt 21:13), and it was his passion for the purity of this house of prayer which was turned against him during his trial (see Matt 26:59-61, and compare John 2:19-22).

And, of course, Jesus prayed through the darkness of death. One of the most moving moments in Scripture comes when Jesus falls to his knees in the Garden of Gethsemane and wrestles with his calling to suffer and die. "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me!" It is hard to imagine a prayer more poignant or heartbreaking, and perhaps impossible to guess at the suffering of both Jesus and the Father at

this terrible time. Yet it is this very prayer which strengthens Jesus anew to face the horror that lay ahead: "Yet not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42). And on the cross, three of the "seven last words" are words of prayer. With almost unbearable grace and love, Jesus prays for his executioners as they hammer in the nails: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). The dreadful sense of separation Jesus experienced as the weight of the world's sin bore down on him wrenches out a despairing cry: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34). And finally, when all is finished, the last words on Jesus' lips are once again words of prayer: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46). As he had lived, so Jesus died: in the presence of God.



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