

Prayer That Does What Prayer Is Supposed To Do

His disciples came to Jesus one day and said, “Jesus, teach us how to pray.” Jesus told them to say:

“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.”

It was a very good answer. It was a very good example and a very good prayer. But what we call The Lord’s Prayer was not the only lesson Jesus had in his school of prayer. Some of us learn better by looking than by listening. Some of us want more to our prayer life than the repetition of one very good prayer. We want prayers that do what prayers are supposed to do—connect us to God. So let’s shadow Jesus. Let’s follow him and eavesdrop on Jesus to see what we can learn about the way he prayed.

Interestingly, the first recorded prayer of Jesus in the New Testament is one you might never have guessed. It was prayed before he was born, even before he was named Jesus. That prayer is recorded in Hebrews 10:5-7:

Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said:

“Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased.

“Then I said, ‘Here I am—it is written about me in the scroll—I have come to do your will, O God.’ “

Apparently this was part of the farewell speech when the Son of God left heaven to come to earth. God the Father didn’t want any more animal sacrifices to atone for human sin. He wanted to fix the relationship between humans and him once and for all. He loved the world so much that he decided to send his one and only Son. The Son of God, not yet called Jesus,

said, “Yes! *Here I am. . . . I have come to do your will, O God.*”

Jesus’ first recorded prayer was not asking but answering. It was not about getting but about giving. It was not about what he wanted but about what God wanted. This was the theme of Jesus’ prayer life from before the beginning in the manger to the cross. He was always ready to do the will of his Father.

Let’s fast-forward 31 years to one of the most successful days of Jesus’ life. We can tell a lot about people by the way they handle success. Strangely, there seem to be more people who can handle failure well than those who can handle success well. Comparatively speaking, it is not the difficulties of life that can take us down but rather the great successes of life. Watch the actor who wins an Oscar. Watch the super athlete who scores a touchdown or wins the Super Bowl. Watch the politician who wins the office. Watch what happens when a neighbor or a relative inherits a fortune or wins the lottery. Watch the guy who gets the girl or the salesperson who sells the most. Watch Jesus celebrating success. We are told in Mark 6:30-46:

The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them,

“Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.”

So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place. But many who saw them leaving recognized them and ran on foot from all

the towns and got there ahead of them. When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.

By this time it was late in the day, so his disciples came to him. “This is a re-

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mote place,” they said, “and it’s already very late. Send the people away so they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat.”

But he answered, “You give them something to eat.”

They said to him, “That would take eight months of a man’s wages! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?”

“How many loaves do you have?” he asked. “Go and see.”

When they found out, they said, “Five—and two fish.”

Then Jesus directed them to have all the people sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to his disciples to set before the people. He also divided the two fish among them all. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish. The number of the men who had eaten was five thousand.

Immediately Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray.

Jesus had performed one of the greatest miracles in all of history. He manipulated the forces of nature. He brought the powers of heaven down to earth. He satisfied the hunger of thousands of people. He became the center of attention and the celebrity of his generation. And how did he celebrate his success? *“He went up on a mountainside to pray.”*

Please don’t misunderstand. It wasn’t that he didn’t enjoy the praise of the people. It wasn’t that he didn’t like the party. It’s just that God was the most important person in Jesus’ life and when any of us experience our greatest success we want to share that success with the person that is most important to us.

Put yourself in Jesus’ sandals. When you have your best day—a promotion at work, your wed-

ding day, the birth of your baby, the day you win the championship, the day your dreams come true—at the end of that day, sneak off to tell God all that has happened. Sneak off to pray.

Good days and difficult days sometimes come on the same day. Just when it seems life can’t get any better things can suddenly become frightening and difficult. Life is like that—a strange blend of the best and the worst, of victory and defeat, of bitter and sweet. For Jesus, the same prayer that celebrated success on the mountainside prepared him for the storm on the water. Mark 6:47-52 continues:

When evening came, the boat was in the middle of the lake, and he was alone on land. He saw the disciples straining at the oars, because the wind was against them. About the fourth watch of the night he went out to them, walking on the lake. He was about to pass by them, but when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost. They cried out, because they all saw him and were terrified.

Immediately he spoke to them and said, “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.” Then he climbed into the boat with them, and the wind died down. They were completely amazed, for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened.

It was on Galilee Lake that this happened. While not a big lake—it’s only about seven miles across—it is a deep lake surrounded by mountains, and storms come up quickly. I know. I was once caught in a storm out on Galilee Lake. It was scary! A group of us had rented a 30 foot fishing boat to go from one side of the lake to the other. It had a main deck and a set of stairs like a ladder that went up to an observation level. The day was clear and the water was calm as we left the dock and most of the passengers went to the upper level for a better view. We were perhaps three-quarters of the way across the lake when, from nowhere, the winds whipped up and the small craft started to heave from side to side. We were top-heavy from all the people upstairs. The captain yelled for them to come down but they were holding on with all their strength to avoid being thrown overboard. No way were they going to climb down. I was on the lower deck enjoying the

excitement until I looked in the captain's eyes and saw panic. He had lived his entire life on this lake and he was truly scared.

That's how it was for Jesus' friends that night on Galilee Lake. They were veteran sailors, but the storm was fierce and frightening and their lives were at risk. They needed help. So Jesus stepped off the shore and *onto* the lake. He walked *on* the water to their boat. Now, if they were scared before, they were really scared when they saw what they thought was a ghost coming their way. When Jesus stepped into their boat the winds subsided and the waves became calm. Everything was safe. The storm was past.

How did he do that? What about the laws of physics? Through the years there have been an abundance of explanations given but no definitive answers. Let me offer you a super-physics explanation. This was the second major miracle in less than 24 hours. It was an act of God. It was the result of prayer.

Did Jesus know that the storm was coming? Probably not. Could he have walked on the water if he had not prayed? We are never told. But the principle here is important: Jesus prayed before the storm so that when the storm came he was ready. Sometimes prayer is celebrating the successes of life. More often prayer is preparing us for the unknown-but-sure-to-come storms of life. Blessed are those who are prayed up before the storms come.

The longest recorded prayer of Jesus is reported in John 17:1-26. Sometimes it is called the "High Priestly Prayer." It was spoken in private so the only way we know what was said is that Jesus told us.

Because the prayer is so long we won't take the time to read it all here, but I want to tell you some things about it. First of all, Jesus kept his eyes open. We often close our eyes to minimize the distractions around us, but Jesus prayed wide-

eyed and looking up toward the face of God. It was the typical Jewish stance.

Also, Jesus prayed for himself, for his disciples and for us. For himself he prayed in verses 2 and 5, "*Father the time has come*" (because he was nearing his death). . . . *And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.*"

Then he prayed for his disciples in verse 11, "*Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name—the name you gave me—so that they may be one as we are one.*" He was concerned about their safety after he died.

And then he prayed for us in verses 20 and 21, "*My prayer is not for (my disciples) alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.*" How stunning to think that Jesus, on his way to the cross, took time to stop and pray one of his longest prayers—and he had you and

me in mind in that prayer! And Jesus is still praying for us every day, including today!

The third point I would like to make is that Jesus' prayer can be hard to understand. It's not that the prayer is confusing, but it is personal and passionate. Jesus is simply talking things through with his Father, from his heart. That's what prayer was for Jesus. And that's what prayer is for many of us, as well. When we pray we pour out our thoughts and feelings in words that others may not easily understand and might even find boring. But God is the best listener in the universe. In many ways, that is the heart of prayer—not so much about asking as it is just talking things through with the God who listens and cares.

Later that same week Jesus knew he had only hours left to live and he was overwhelmed. He thought about dying. He thought about the pain of crucifixion. He thought about having the sins of the world dumped on him. As a result, he was depressed.

Have you ever felt so totally down that you thought you might die? Have you ever been so

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discouraged you felt you couldn't face tomorrow? Have you ever felt totally overwhelmed? That's how Jesus felt the night before he died. Matthew 26:36-44 records Jesus' experience:

Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me."

Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."

Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?" he asked Peter. "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak."

He went away a second time and prayed, "My father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done."

When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing.

What did Jesus do when the weight of the world was crushing him? He prayed . . . and prayed . . . and prayed. Not standing with his eyes looking up to heaven but face-down on the ground. Desperate. Troubled. He poured his heart out to God for help and hope.

And God answered his prayer, but not in the way he asked. God has different ways of answering prayers. Sometimes it is exactly as we request; other times it is very different. He did not remove the horrors that Jesus faced; instead he took his beloved Son through those horrors to the other side.

Our last portrait of Jesus in prayer is not a pretty sight. He has been severely beaten, crucified and abandoned by most of his friends. It was painful to see him then and it is painful to picture him now. He felt forsaken by God and desperately alone, yet he prayed to his last breath.

Luke 23:46 tells us, "*Jesus called out with a loud voice, 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.'* When he had said this, he breathed his last." Prayer was so woven into who Jesus was that he never stopped.

I don't pretend to understand what was going through his mind. Earlier he had said, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" I do know that his throat was parched and he was in excruciating pain. If ever there was a moment when someone felt completely abandoned and alone, this was it. If there ever was a time you wouldn't pray, this was the time. But connection with God was so central to his life that he stayed connected to the last second of his life.

Did Jesus know at that moment that he would rise again from the dead? Intellectually, yes. He had predicted that he would come back to life again after three days. But, when we are in pain and alone, our hearts don't always keep up with our heads. We don't always feel what we know. As Jesus was dying he did the last what he had done from the first. He committed himself to God the Father in prayer, even though his feelings must have been struggling to keep up with his faith.

All of this is not meant to be a lesson in prayer. It is meant to be an encounter with Jesus. When we experience Jesus we want to be like him. Who he is drives us to him and what he did. As Christians we are drawn to pray as he prayed—when leaving home, when celebrating success, when walking into a raging storm, when talking about life, when feeling overwhelmed and even right up to our very last breath. You see, Jesus has taught us a whole lot more than the words of the Lord's Prayer. He actually showed us how to pray.

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