

10 Pivotal Moments When Jesus Prayed

“He told them a parable to illustrate that it is necessary always to pray and not lose heart” (Luke 18:1).

People sometimes ask me, “Why should I pray? The Lord knows everything that is going to happen anyway, so do my prayers make a difference?”

The fundamental answer to that question is: “Jesus told us to pray.” He never asks us to do something He Himself did not do.

Each of the four Gospel writers shows key moments when Jesus prayed: Matthew records nine such incidents; Mark, eight; Luke, 13; and John, five. From these 35 references, there are 23 separate occasions in Jesus’ 3-year ministry when the Holy Spirit pulls back the curtain on His prayer life. Let us look at them.

1. At His baptism. Luke notes, “And when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened” (3:21). During this moment of prayer, the Holy Spirit descended on Him in bodily form like a dove, and a voice spoke from heaven saying, “‘You are My beloved Son. In You I am well pleased’” (Luke 3:22). While the sky may not split wide while we pray nor the Spirit descend bodily, nevertheless heaven does open when we pray, the Spirit does come on us, and in prayer the Father assures us of His love.

2. Prior to selecting the Twelve. Jesus spent the night in the hills praying to God before He selected the disciples the next morning (Luke 6:12-16). A fascinating cross-reference is found in Matthew’s account. Prior to selecting the apostles, Jesus told them to “pray to the Lord of the harvest, that He will send out laborers into His harvest” (Matt. 9:38). After this prayer, Matthew records Jesus selecting the Twelve (Matt.

10:1).

I have often wondered if there is not a connection between 9:38 and 10:1. We know that Jesus had more than 12 followers: 72 (Luke 10:1), 120 (Acts 1:15), and 500 (1 Cor. 15:6). How then did these 12 “make the cut”? I suspect they were the ones who took Jesus’ request to pray seriously. While He was praying all night, they spent time praying as well. No one ever works effectively in the harvest of people unless he has prayed first for the harvest.

3. After His rejection at Korazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum (Matt. 11:20-26). Jesus did mighty miracles in these three towns. Peter, Andrew, and Philip came from Bethsaida; James, John, and Matthew (Levi) came from Capernaum. Despite His mighty works in these towns, despite that half of the Twelve came from these towns—they rejected Him. This had to sting.

How do we respond when people reject us, when hard circumstances come our way? We must do what Jesus did—repair to prayer. In conversation with the Lord, our lives are refocused. We learn that His approval is more important.

4. At the hinge moment of recognition. The disciples had followed Jesus for 2 years, and the time had come for them to perceive His identity. Would they lay aside their preconceived idea of a political Messiah and accept Jesus’ revelation of Himself? The answer comes at Caesarea Philippi. It is while Jesus prays in private and His disciples are with Him that He begins to question them: “Who do the people say that I am? ... Who do you say that I am?” (Luke 9:18, 20).

If we desire others to come to Jesus, let us follow Jesus’ pattern. That individual we are witnessing to has come to the major crossroads of life, the hinge moment that determines his earthly and eternal destiny. We must precede this moment by earnest prayer on our part.

5. At the high moment of revelation. Eight days after the

disciples confessed Him as Christ, Jesus took Peter, James, and John with Him to a high mountain to pray. During His time of prayer He experienced metamorphosis: His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning (Matt. 17:2; Luke 9:28-29). It was the only time in His ministry where His divine nature shined through His human skin.

Prayer for us can also involve times of intense exhilaration in the presence of the Lord. The baptism in the Holy Spirit is certainly such a moment when our ineffable joy is expressed in words we do not know.

6. At times of deep need in others. The death of their brother, Lazarus, overwhelmed Mary and Martha. Jesus had only deepened their anguish by His delay in coming. They took Jesus to the grave and He was deeply moved. He ordered the stone removed and then prayed (John 11:41-42).

We too face deep moments of sorrow with others. We stand at the bedsides of dying parishioners and friends, or at the gravesides of committal. We always pray in such a time—and regardless of the circumstances we say with Jesus, “I knew that You always hear me.” The result from our prayer may be different from that with Lazarus, and that is a mystery for us. But we know He “at all times lives to make intercession for [us]” (Heb. 7:25).

7. At the Last Supper. On the fateful evening Jesus was betrayed, He shared a last meal with those closest to Him. Despite knowing what lay before Him, He nevertheless gave thanks when He took the cup (Matt. 26:26,27).

What a lesson for us when we face adversity—as storm clouds gather in our lives, we can face them first with thanksgiving before we drink our own cup of sorrow. It is during the Passover meal that Jesus gave His high-priestly prayer (John 17). He prayed for Himself (vv. 1-5), for His disciples (vv.

6-19) and for us (vv. 20-26). The Twelve never forgot that prayer, and the people closest to us also will not forget the prayers we pray when we face hardship, suffering and even death.

8. In Gethsemane. Where olives were crushed (the literal meaning of Geth- semane), Jesus himself came under great stress. Luke tells us the anguish was so great His sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground (Luke 22:41-44). There He prayed three times, “Your will be done” (Matt. 26:36–44). He, who just days earlier raised Lazarus, now declines to extricate Himself from a horrendous death. He could easily have risen from prayer, taken the quick walk eastward up the Mount of Olives, and disappeared into the Judean desert. But He stayed ... for us.

There are times when we are not free to pursue our own comfort and leisure—moments when we must stick by our post of duty. What stabilizes us and gives us fortitude to remain is our life in prayer.

9. On the cross. The Gospels, all together, record Jesus speaking seven times from the cross. The first, fourth and last times are prayers.

He began by praying, “Father, forgive” (Luke 23:34). He does not close His fist and shout, “I’ll get even with you for this. I’ll send you to hell for this.” No. He opens His hand, receives the nail, and opens His heart to intercede for the very people putting Him to death. He models for us that we too must forgive our enemies.

His second prayer, the fourth “word” from the cross is “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34). We often call this the cry of dereliction. Remember, however, that Jesus’ limited amount of breathing constricted His ability to vocalize from the cross. His words are the first words from Psalm 22—a psalm that ends in triumph. As His death

approached, Jesus lets us know He is praying Scripture. Yes, at the moment, it appears God has abandoned Him, but not for long: "For He has not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted. ... All the ends of the world will remember and turn to the Lord" (Ps. 22:24, 27). We must never give in to the idea that God has abandoned us. There are moments when we feel utter darkness about us, but our end is sure. He will never leave us nor forsake us (Heb. 13:5).

The final word from the cross is His prayer, "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit" (Luke 23:46). This is the first prayer every Jewish child learns, much like we teach our children: "Now I lay me down to sleep" The words are found in Psalm 31:5, except Jesus added one word to the prayer that makes all the difference: Father. In life and in death, we can trust the Father and commit all that we are to Him.

10. Other occasions. Jesus not only prayed at the key moments of His ministry, there were other times when He prayed. He prayed while it was still dark (Mark 1:35), after an exhausting schedule culminating in the feeding of the 5,000, into the evening (Matt. 14:23), and continuing all night in prayer (Luke 6:12). His frequent withdrawals to prayer tell us that He desired uninterrupted moments with the Father.

He took children in His arms and prayed for them (Matt. 19:13), prayed that the disciples receive the Spirit (John 14:16), and for the faith of His lead disciple to not fail (Luke 22:31-32).

The New Testament records three times when tears fall on Jesus' cheeks. The first such occasion is at the grave of Lazarus (John 11:35). After 3 years of ministry, Jesus had not grown calloused or clinical about human suffering. Jesus is moved with compassion by our need.

The second time we see Him praying with tears is when "When He came near, He beheld the city and wept over it" (Luke 19:41).

Finally, the writer of Hebrews says, "In the days of His flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death. He was heard because of His godly fear" (5:7). He wept fervently for one person, for one city, and for His own submission to the Father's will.