

# **PRAYER IN THE LIFE OF JESUS**

**By Dub McClish**

## **Introduction**

Paul wrote of Jesus: “For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily” (Col. 2:9). Yet, this same Paul also wrote: “For there is one God, one mediator also between God and men, himself man, Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5, emph. DM). He was as much a human being as he was Deity, possessing the fullness of both natures (John 1:1–3, 14). It is from His human nature that His prayer life springs.

No one can read the four New Testament accounts of the life of the Lord and come away doubting that He was a man of earnest prayer. His emphasis and dependence upon prayer must be a powerful and positive example for every ordinary son and daughter of God: “He that saith he abideth in him ought himself also to walk even as he walked” (1 John 2:6).

Most of the references to Jesus’ prayers simply tell us that He prayed, giving us no hint of their content. However, the inspired historians imply or state all or some of the content of some of His prayers, while not recording them. Finally, there are at least five occasions of the Lord’s prayers that preserve the actual words He prayed.

## **Miscellaneous Occasions of Prayer**

Jesus rebuked the hypocrisy of those who ostentatiously made a display of their private and personal prayers in public to impress observers (Mat. 6:5). In contrast, He taught that one should find a place of privacy for such: “But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thine inner chamber, and having shut thy door, pray to thy Father who is in

secret, and thy Father who seeth in secret shall recompense thee” (v. 6). In almost all of the descriptions of Him in prayer, He does this very thing. Since He had no house of His own (8:20), He had no literal “inner chamber” (“closet,” KJV) as others might. He thus had to find other locations that served this same purpose, as several passages indicate.

Chronologically, the first mention of Jesus praying is in Mark 1:35: “And in the morning, a great while before day, he rose up and went out, and departed into a desert place, and there prayed.” The Lord sought communion with His Father before the rigorous activities of His day began by stealing away from His place of rest before daylight. *Desert place* does not here refer to a wasteland devoid of any vegetation, but merely to a deserted place (as in “Gaza, the same is desert” [Acts 8:26]), where in solitude He could voice His personal petitions Heavenward.

After Jesus received the sad news of John’s death, He withdrew to a deserted place, perhaps to pour out His grief to His Father (Mat. 15:12–13a). However, the multitudes, hearing of his whereabouts, flocked to Him. He likely spent several hours healing their sick and afterward fed them—all five thousand of them (vv. 13b–21). He must have been exhausted, but He again resumed what the multitude had earlier interrupted: “And after he had sent the multitudes away, he went up into the mountain apart to pray: and when even was come, he was there alone” (v. 23). These words imply that He continued in prayer for a considerable period of time.

The several other such mentions of His prayer habits are worded very similarly to those above. After cleansing a leper, He “withdrew himself in the deserts, and prayed” (Luke 5:16). After healing the man with the withered hand on the sabbath, “...he went

out into the mountain to pray; and he continued all night in prayer to God” (6:12) (a feat unequaled in the entire Bible). Significantly, the next day was the one in which He chose His apostles (v. 13).

In the following two passages we see the Lord praying in the presence of others. Luke tells us that the occasion on which the transfiguration occurred began as one of prayer wherein Jesus was praying in the company of Peter, James, and John (9:28–29). Luke 11:1 simply states that He was praying “in a certain place” in the presence of unnamed disciples, one of whom asked Him to teach them to pray. Complying with their request, the Lord repeated an abbreviated version of His model prayer from the Sermon on the Mount (vv. 2–4; cf. Mat. 6:9–13).

### **Prayers in Which Content Is Implied**

Jesus not only prayed after he fed the five thousand, but He also prayed before he did so. The Synoptic writers as one say that Jesus looked up to Heaven and “blessed” (Mat. 14:19; Mark 6:41; Luke 9:16). John serves as the inspired commentator in his account of the same event when he states: “Jesus therefore took the loaves; and having given thanks...” (John 6:11). Subsequently, he described this place as “...the place where they ate the bread after the Lord had given thanks” (v. 23). We thus learn (1) that to “bless” in some contexts refers to prayer and (2) that Jesus’ prayer on this occasion was one of thanksgiving.

Soon after the account of His feeding the five thousand, we read of His feeding the four thousand. Only Matthew and Mark record this miracle. Matthew says that the Lord “gave thanks” for the seven loaves and few fish (15:36). Mark says that He gave

thanks for the loaves and that He “blessed” concerning the fish (8:6–7). Again, *bless* and *give thanks* are used interchangeably, and thanksgiving was the content of this prayer.

The accounts of the institution of the Lord’s supper make the same interchangeable use of the foregoing terms. Before breaking and passing the bread to the apostles, Matthew 26:26 and Mark 14:22 say that the Lord “blessed” (“blessed it” [italicized], KJV). However, Luke’s record of the same occurrence says concerning the bread, “when he had given thanks” (22:19; cf. 1 Cor. 11:23–24). Matthew and Mark tell us what they meant by the word blessed as they describe the Lord’s action relative to the cup: “he...gave thanks” (Mat. 26:27) and “when he had given thanks” (Mark 14:23). Luke adds that He did “in like manner” concerning the cup as He had done for the bread (i.e., He “gave thanks”) (Luke 22:20; cf. 1 Cor. 11:25).

Thus brethren who pray before the observance of the Lord’s supper that God will “bless this bread/cup” misapprehend the content of Jesus’ prayers when He instituted His supper. He did not ask the Father to bless these elements, but He “blessed” concerning them—simply another word for giving thanks. Ironically, prayers at the Lord’s table often contain much flowery and even superfluous verbiage, while leaving out the very (and only) thing Jesus exemplified—thanksgiving for the bread and the fruit of the vine, respectively.

Luke tells us that Jesus “made supplication for” Peter that his faith would not fail when Satan sifted him as wheat (22:31–32). (While the Lord prayed for Peter, He did not ask the Father to interfere with or overrule his free will.) The two disciples on the

road to Emmaus recognized Jesus only when He “took bread and blessed” before they ate (Luke 24:30)—another occasion where *bless* describes a prayer of thanksgiving, thus indicating the subject matter of this prayer.

As Jesus prepared the apostles for His imminent departure and return to the Father, He promised them that He would pray that the Father would give them another Comforter (John 14:16). He obviously prayed this prayer, which was fulfilled in the sending of the Holy Spirit upon them on Pentecost. Once more, while we do not have the specific wording, Jesus clearly states the content and aim of this prayer.

### **Prayers for Which We Have His Actual Words**

The earliest of these prayers is a very brief statement of thanksgiving. After He had cried out against the citizens of Bethsaida, Chorazin, and Capernaum, who had remained faithless in spite of His signs and miracles, the Lord prayed:

I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou didst hide these things from the wise and understanding, and didst reveal them unto babes: yea, Father, for so it was well-pleasing in thy sight (Mat. 11:25–26).

The second preserved prayer is also one of thanksgiving, prayed at the tomb of Lazarus. After they removed the stone from the tomb’s mouth, Jesus “...lifted up his eyes, and said,

Father, I thank thee that thou heardest me. And I knew that thou hearest me always: but because of the multitude that standeth around I said it, that they may believe that thou didst send me (John 11:41–42).

Jesus implies that He had earlier petitioned the Father concerning His friend Lazarus. His prayer at Lazarus's tomb expressed thanksgiving that the Father had already granted His prayer, and His absolute confidence that His Father heard Him always. He so worded His prayer that all who observed would both glorify the Father and invest faith in Himself as sent from God when Lazarus would come forth. (This stupendous act caused so many of the Jews to believe on the Lord that it provoked the Sanhedrin to its ultimate resolve to destroy Him [vv. 45–53]).

The fullest account of any of Jesus' prayers is that which occupies the entirety of John 17. This magnificent intercessory prayer is truly deserving of the label, *The Lord's Prayer*. In it, the Savior intercedes first for Himself, that the Father would restore to Him the Heavenly glory He gave up in coming below (vv. 1–5). He next intercedes for the apostles, into whose hands He would deliver all the Truth (vv. 6–19, 24–26; 16:13). Finally, He intercedes for all who would hear the words of the apostles and thereby believe on Him—which plea includes all who have believed, who now believe, and who ever will believe (as the New Testament defines saving faith) in the Lord (vv. 20–23).

Immediately after the extended prayer above (apparently prayed in the presence of the eleven apostles in the upper room [John 18:1; cf. Mat. 26:36]), the twelve men crossed the Kidron valley to Gethsemane. There the Lord uttered the same hauntingly beautiful prayer three times: “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass away from me: nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt” (Mat. 26:39, 42, 44; cf. Mark 15:35–39; Luke 22:41–44).

His agony was obviously great, but His resignation was equally strong. The consummation of the very purpose for which He had made His earthly visit—to be the ultimate sacrificial Lamb (John 1:29; 3:17; 12:47; et al.)—had now arrived. However, His human nature reacted with dread, fear, and horror at the full cup of suffering that He knew He must now drink. (While He warned against “vain repetitions” in our prayers [Mat. 6:7], it is obvious from His Gethsemane prayers that it is possible to engage in repetitive prayers without their being vain.)

While He was on the cross, the Lord prayed three brief prayers. He first “cried with a loud voice, saying, ... My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Mat. 27:46; Mark 15:34). In His indescribable pain, His humanity surfaced once more, as He thus cried out in agony. Then, we marvel at His utterly unselfish prayer for the bloodthirsty, jeering crowd and the heartless men who had driven the spikes through His undeafened hands and feet: “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34a). (This prayer was fulfilled for many of these very sinners about seven weeks later as they obeyed the Gospel plan of salvation on Pentecost (Acts 2:22–23, 37–38, 41, 47).

Finally, with His merciful dying breath, “Jesus...with a loud voice, said, Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit” (Luke 23:46). He had now offered His precious, unspotted, unblemished blood of redemption for all mankind, the ultimate offering foreknown before the foundation of the world (1 Pet. 1:18–20). He could now return to the Father after His brief sojourn in paradise and Joseph’s new tomb.

## **Conclusion**

What are some things we can learn and emulate from the prayer life of our Lord?

- Prayer should not be a mere isolated, emergency measure, but a part of the normal fabric of our lives.
- We may pray both in the presence of others (bearing in mind the authority limitations for women) and privately, but we should frequently seek a place of solitude for our prayers.
- We should never cease to offer prayers of gratitude and thanksgiving to our Father.
- We should ever thank God for our daily blessing of food.
- We may pray “long” prayers or “short” prayers, depending on the occasion and need.
- We may repeat the same prayer, as long as it is not thoughtlessly memorized and thus vain.
- Our prayers should always demonstrate our complete trust in and dependence upon our Heavenly Father.
- Our prayers should always imply, if not state, that we will conform our wills to God’s will, even if it requires great sacrifice on our part.

If the Only Begotten Son of God, Who possessed the fullness of Deity, saw the need for frequent prayer, how much more should we as mere finite sons and daughters of God?

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