

## Why Did Jesus Pray?

Isa. 40:27-31 Mark 1:21-31

“In the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus went out to the wilderness, and there he prayed.”

It is pop quiz time. Why did Jesus pray? Why would the Son of Man, the Messiah, the Second Person of the Trinity, God’s only begotten son get up early to pray? I will give you a couple of minutes. Feel free to talk to your neighbor. See what you think?

Some of the commentators seem to think he went for renewal, for spiritual boost before beginning his day. Like some joggers who need to get things going before they suit up for the office.

Why did Jesus pray?

Some say he was getting his marching orders for the day. That it was a way of tuning in to God’s will. As he taught his disciples to pray “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done.” We know in Gethsemane he prayed “not my will, but thy will be done.”

Why did he pray?

Some say he is plugging into the power source. That this is where his ability to heal and to cast out evil comes from. That he is close to the source of all love, of all well being. On another day he told his disciples that certain demons could only be cast out with prayer and fasting.

If it was one of us, we might think that he was out there asking for forgiveness. “Father, forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors” is part of the prayer of Jesus. But we have it as official church doctrine that Jesus does not need forgiveness. (Though I can think of a couple of days when he sure pushes the envelope on that one.)

So why did Jesus pray? Drum roll. May I have the envelope please. The answer is: I don’t know. Perhaps it is some of all of the above, plus something indescribable; something beyond our experience.

But what I do know and what is made clear all through the Gospels, all the way up to Gethsemane and even the cross, is that Jesus, man of Nazareth, Son of God, does pray. He does call on his heavenly father. And if Jesus needed to pray, then so do I. If Jesus took time to pray, then so should we.

There are various obstacles to prayer. Some are intellectual and some are just habit.

Maybe we don’t know how. Maybe we feel a little silly, or childish when we try. I mean, we are too old to say “now I lay me down to sleep”, but it may be the only prayer we know. And it does seem odd to sit alone and to address ourselves to the unseen One.

Most of us can pray when we are in trouble; or when someone we love is in great need. Then we go ahead and call on God, whether we know the “right words” or not. “Lord, help us. Lord,

help my child, my friend, my spouse. Hey Lord, over here, we need you now. This would be a really good time to show up.” We know something about that prayer.

But overall, praying on a regular basis seems a little odd, don't you think? After all, we are busy people. Why tell God something God already knows? Why bother the Almighty with my little stuff when God has a really big to do list: moving mountains, causing earthquakes, counting the hairs on everybody's head, tracking every sparrow and butterfly in creation.

Besides, if God is eternal, infinite, immeasurable, incomprehensible, omnipotent” (The Scots Confession) my little prayer is not going to change anything. It would be like firing a pea shooter at a battleship to change its direction. No effect. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century theology it became standard practice to say that prayer does not change God, it changes us. So what is the point of my praying for my neighbor, or for enemies, if that is the case? Who wants to make prayer all about me? That does not seem very helpful.

Well, I know a half dozen more reasons not to pray. But what I do know is: Jesus prayed. He taught and even told his disciples to pray. So there must be something to it.

Prayer for Christians begins in imitation and obedience. We seek to walk the path that Jesus walked.

Some ask in various situations “What would Jesus do?” Well here is one where we know what Jesus did. He got up early to pray. He said to his disciples “when you pray...” not “if you pray”. So we obey and we get on our knees before God. Or we sit in a chair by the window quietly. Or we sit on the edge of the bed at night before we turn the light out to offer our thanks for the day. Because Jesus prayed, we pray. Not knowing how to do it or quite why, we humble ourselves and we seek God – alone, and with others in settings of small groups, and with the community in worship. We obey and we pray.

It is in the doing that comes the understanding. We overcome the obstacles through our practice.

The disciples asked Jesus one day, having watched him for a while, they asked “Lord, teach us to pray.” And he did. So there must be something here to learn. Something we can practice. Something we can grow better at.

If you say that you do not pray, or that you don't know how – no problem. There are some ways to learn and people who want to learn with you.

I will now make a shameless plug for our Lenten Study groups, which begin in just a few weeks. The whole theme this year is a focus on a few basic practices that will help us grow in Christian faith and faithfulness. A few things we can learn, do, practice so that we may grow up in Christ. Sign up now. We have a special on this week: two for one. Just tell them Charlie sent you.

If we do not know how to pray, there are books, and tapes, and Scripture, and small groups that can help us learn. There is the promise of Christ that he will give us a helper, the Holy Spirit, who prays through even our sighs and groans, and mumbling words.

I want you to think of that thing that you do, that you love to do so much that you practice it: cooking, or tennis, or music, or woodworking, or knitting. Maybe it matters enough that you get

up early to do it, or go to bed late. Maybe you have even taken lessons along the way. You practice, and try new things, and look for folk who may give you a tip or two.

That can be your prayer life, too. Never perfect, never finished, always pulling you forward to return and try again. It is in the doing that we come to understanding.

I don't know the answers to all the conundrums about prayer. But I know that Jesus prayed. That he taught his disciples to pray. That he came out of his prayer time ready to heal, to cast out demons, and ready to proclaim the closeness of God's kingdom in all the towns of Galilee.

I want to close with one of my favorite stories. It is found in Anthony Bloom's book "Beginning to Pray" (pp 60-61). He was a Russian Orthodox priest.

*An elderly woman came to see me after my first celebration of the mass. She said "Father, I would like to have advice about prayer." So I said "Oh yes, ask Rev. So n So." She said "All these years I have been asking people who are reputed to know about prayer, and they have never given me a sensible reply, so I thought that as you probably know nothing, you may by chance blunder out the right thing. ...*

*So I said "What is your problem?" The old lady said "these fourteen years I have been praying the Jesus Prayer almost continually, and never have I perceived God's presence at all." So I blundered out what I thought. "If you speak all the time, you don't give God a chance to place a word in." She said "What shall I do?"*

*I said, "Go to your room after breakfast...light your little lamp before the ikon ...just sit, look around, and try to see where you love...And then take your knitting and for fifteen minutes knit before the face of God, but I forbid you to say one word of prayer."*

*She didn't think it was very pious advice but she took it. After a while she came to see me and said, "You know, it works." I said "What works?" She said "I did just what you advised me to do. I got up, washed, put my room right...then I settled in my armchair and thought "Oh how nice. I have fifteen minutes during which I can do nothing without being guilty!" after a while I remembered that I must knit before the face of God, and so I began to knit.*

*I became more aware of the silence. The needles hit the armrest of my chair, the clock was ticking peacefully, that was nothing to bother about...after a while I perceived that this silence was not simply an absence of noise, but that the silence had substance...All of a sudden I perceived that the silence was a presence. At the heart of the silence was Him who is all stillness, all peace, all poise."*

At the heart of the silence was a presence...the One who is all stillness, all peace, all poise.

Those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up on wings like eagles, they shall run and not grow weary, they shall walk and not faint.

Thanks be to God.

Dr. Charlie Summers