

The Gethsemane Prayer of Jesus

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They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," he said to them. "Stay here and keep watch."

Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. "Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."

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

Once more he went away and prayed the same thing. When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. They did not know what to say to him.

Returning the third time, he said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Enough! The hour has come. Look, the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!"

Mark 14:32-42 (NIV)

The Lord's Prayer (Matt. 5:9-13 and variations) is often considered the quintessential model prayer. It is a prayer but also a pedagogical instrument, teaching us how to come to God, how to align our priorities before God, and what it is we are to ask for. It is doubtful that Jesus ever intended the prayer to be only used as a rote piece but this is the way it has most often been used.¹ We should understand that in praying the Lord's Prayer we are given the freedom and responsibility to provide our own detail and color, our unique person and passion, our particular context and history. We are to pray the Lord's Prayer from the inside out, supplying the lived reality of our own life.

In what follows, I want to suggest that another prayer of Jesus, his Gethsemane prayer, faithfully fulfills the spirit and intent of the model prayer we call the Lord's Prayer. The Gethsemane prayer is not the prayer that Jesus taught us but the prayer that Jesus himself prayed. It is a living, breathing, and personal application of the model prayer he taught. As we all know, any model prayer used unthinkingly can become degraded into mere formality and rote repetition. Our common experience of the Lord's Prayer shows us how this can and does happen. But true prayer is always more than its

¹ The context is instructive: "And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him." (Matt. 6:7-8). The lesson Jesus gives here could be extended to the problem of meaningless repetition of form prayers. Although Jesus gives us an outline of true prayer, he certainly intends for us to be personally thoughtful about what we are saying and the spirit in which we say it.

petitions; it is always more than what is said. Hannah's wordless prayer (1 Sam. 1:13) reminds us that true prayer is "poured-out-soul". True prayer seeks a vital connection between our person and the infinite-personal God. This is not to diminish the importance of content in the practice of prayer but it does highlight what prayer is not – it is not formulaic, it is not magical, and it is certainly never rote. True prayer is always an application of the relational reality that provides its foundation. And Jesus taught us nothing if he did not teach true prayer. Kenneth Leech says,

At heart prayer is a process of self-giving and of being set free from isolation. To pray is to enter into a relationship with God and to be transformed in him... Many people however see prayer merely as asking God for things... prayer is seen in essential functional terms... I am not suggesting that asking is not appropriate or unimportant. In fact, the teaching of Jesus places asking as a central element in prayer. But this depends upon the kind of relationship we have with God, and upon the kind of God we believe in. Beginning to think about prayer is beginning to think about God, for the Christian faith knows nothing of God apart from relationship.²

I want to examine those elements of Christian prayer that are necessary to its full realization, namely, that it is always relational, always an expression of need, always dependent on a proper view of God, and always an act of yieldedness to God's will. Without diminishing the content of prayer (its central and essential petitions), I want to understand the nature and dynamic of prayer as a relational exercise where intimacy, trust, and understanding come together. In this I want to propose that we will be served well by watching and listening to the prayer Jesus prayed in Gethsemane. The model of prayer that he taught in the Sermon on the Mount (the Lord's Prayer) is, in Gethsemane, given its laboratory. The ideal of the model prayer is there worked into the history of the Son of God as a real and vital moment. In Gethsemane, prayer is not a theory but a lifeline. My purpose, then, is to examine the nature of this actual recorded prayer of Jesus and see in what way it fulfills the spirit of the model prayer he taught us.

Before we explore the prayer, we need to orient ourselves to the Gethsemane moment. This episode begins the culminating and central crisis in the life of Jesus as the messianic Son of God: his arrest and trial, suffering and crucifixion. It is the "hour" he has anticipated; it has not come upon him unprepared in heart or mind. And yet the sheer weight of the moment does appear to undo him; he experiences an existential trial of soul that is beyond our ability to fully relate to.³ For Jesus, this moment represents a kind of suffering that moves beyond human experience. In Jesus, God reveals himself a passionate God; the impassable deity of Greek construction is denied. In the words of a contemporary wag, he is the "most moved mover". God somehow enters into suffering.

² Kenneth Leech. *True Prayer: An Invitation to Christian Spirituality*. San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1980. p. 6-7

³ *Gethsemane* is a Hebrew/Aramaic transliteration for "oil press", an allusion to the significance of the moment as ultimate test, exposing the Son of God to his purposed vocation and his true humanity.

Of course, the humanity of Jesus is also here on display. He experiences his trial as a man.

The moment is meant also to show that there are two possible ways to be human: the first is the way of faithfulness and obedience (Jesus), while the second is the way of dullness and disconnectedness (the disciples). One of the definitive lessons of the Gethsemane story is that the exercise of prayer is part of what defines and effects the difference. Jesus, as the “humanity of God”⁴, faced with an ultimate decision, displaying a quality of anguish that we have never before seen in him, prays. The disciples, exhausted, confused, weak in their sorrow, sleep. The trial that is dawning upon the whole company is met with differing responses and the result of each of the two ways is known by outcomes. Jesus faces his arrest and death with resolve while the disciples run off into the night.

Of course it is the very mystery of the person of Christ that makes this scene difficult for us to fully relate to. Our developed understanding of Jesus as the incarnate Son of God is here fully put to the test in the Gethsemane prayer. There is something of the impenetrable mystery of divine love and the cost of the atonement worked out here before us. We can only watch as the Son accepts his suffering vocation; we recognize that what Jesus experiences is absolutely without parallel. We realize that what he now begins to endure is much more than a physical or emotional challenge, for it entails a spiritual struggle of the utmost intensity. The divine tri-unity will now absorb the alienation of sin; the favored Son will face the rejection of the Father; the loved one will take judgement upon himself; the pure one will become sin for us. As is often noted, there have been martyrs who have met their deaths with surer resolve and more confident step, but this is not a martyr’s experience. This moment is without human parallel; sin and death are being swallowed up in the willing sacrifice of Jesus.

And yet in this divine work, we are shown the humanity of Jesus and the resources with which he meets his vocational task. We are called to follow in the way that Jesus leads (Luke 22:39 suggests such: “*Jesus went out as usual to the Mount of Olives, and his disciples followed him*”), and to pray in the way that he prays. The test that has come upon the divine Son, though absolutely different from that of his disciples, is nonetheless to be met with the same resources that they are given. The disciples are exhorted repeatedly to pray for the ability to stand in the time of testing⁵, something Jesus expects them to do and something Jesus does in their company. In other words, Jesus’ night of prayer in Gethsemane is not seen as something beyond the possibilities of our humanity but as appropriate to it, especially in those critical moments of test and trial. For Jesus, his arrival at this Gethsemane moment exposes his life-habit of prayer

⁴ Ray S. Anderson uses this term in showing how all humanity is “co-humanity” and that God, in Jesus, has become one with us to experience our plight and redeem us from it. “The Little Man on the Cross: Where is God When We Suffer?” in *The Shape of Practical Theology: Empowering Ministry With Theological Praxis*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001. pp. 311-316

⁵ Gk. *peirasmos* denotes a test, trial or temptation

(Luke 22:44, “and being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly”). Those who know the path to God can find it in the dark. Jesus’ own understanding of his identity and vocation is here tested and he enters the test by seeking the place of prayer. For Jesus, this moment of prayer is simply an extension of a life-time of practice.

My contention in this paper is that the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane is a window into the whole understanding of Christian prayer. The fact that Jesus brought along the three disciples to pray with him at this crucial moment suggests that he intended to openly expose himself and this prayer for our benefit. Evidently this prayer was not simply to remain an event in the secret prayer life of Jesus. Instead, in the moment of his extreme trial, Jesus openly revealed himself as a model pray-er, articulating the way of prayer as much as its substance. Here content and context are wedded, and the Lord’s Prayer is prayed by the Lord himself in a way that breaks form but preserves essence. By following Jesus to this place we are to understand and emulate his way of prayer, and perhaps his model prayer more completely.

Premise: I am in relationship with you (“Abba Father”)

Like the prayer Jesus teaches his disciples, in the Gethsemane prayer he addresses God as Father, an idea which encapsulates his distinct and fundamental thinking. Jesus regularly and characteristically addressed God as Father and taught his disciples to do the same.⁶ In the recorded prayer life of Jesus, this is the only time we find preserved the intimate Aramaic expression for father, *Abba*.⁷ The address was rarely used in contemporary Jewish piety but it stood at the heart of the theology of Jesus and the subsequent Christian understanding of prayer in his name. We might say that God’s Fatherhood, and the opening of that relationship to those who would follow and embrace Jesus as God’s Son, was at the heart of the theological understanding of Jesus. A.W. Tozer once asserted that “what comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us”; he made the case that what one thought of God was determinative of a person’s spiritual future.⁸ The theology of God’s Fatherhood, which Jesus taught and prayed, set the groundwork for the church that lives and prays in his name. In other words, Jesus clarified the issue of what God was like: God is *abba*, personal and embracing, loving and strong, the Father of Jesus Christ, and “Our Father” through faith in his name (Gal. 3:26). Christian prayer (Christ-like prayer) is praying with this understanding and this confidence. Jesus affirmed his own unique filial relationship with God but nevertheless invited his disciples to enter into the same relational dynamic that he had with God (cf. John 20:17). Prayer is built on relationship, the kind of relationship that Jesus had with God. Dunn says: “This integration of christology,

⁶ So powerful was this address in the early Christian consciousness that the Aramaic *Abba* (the *ipssima verba* of Jesus) made its way into the later Greek writings of Paul (Rom. 8:15f and Gal. 4:6f).

⁷ J.D.G. Dunn, “Prayer”. *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*. Eds. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, I Howard Marshall. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992. pp. 617-625 – J. Jeremias contended that the Aramaic term was the underlying concept for the Greek address for father (*pater*), an assertion that is hard to refute.

⁸ A.W. Tozer. *The Knowledge of The Holy*. San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1961. p. 1

soteriology and spirituality, of doctrine and experience, is thus at the heart of Christianity”.⁹

We are reminded once again of the relationship of theology and prayer: that our experience of God is built on our knowledge of God. P.T. Forsyth contended that religious life is best known through its practice and understanding of prayer; “it is in prayer that our real idea of God appears, and in prayer that our real relation to God shows itself”.¹⁰ Here, in Gethsemane, the theology of Jesus is worked out in his moment of extreme crisis. What Jesus has apparently known consistently through the breadth of his life – personal intimacy and relationship to God – is now put to the test. He is faced with the threat of God’s silence, God’s inactivity to alter circumstance, God’s apparent abandonment to the hostility of violent men. In other words, Jesus is faced with the real dilemma of the righteous sufferer, the fear that such suffering is in fact an evidence of being “God-forsaken”. This is the age-old question which Jesus now encounters. Gethsemane is the door into this darkness which will culminate in the cry of dereliction on the cross (“*my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*”, Mk. 15:34). What Jesus now asserts, as he enters the darkness of the night of arrest and day of crucifixion to follow, is his relationship to God; he rehearses his identity as the favored Son despite the immanent evidence to the contrary. The old simplistic theology that temporary blessing reveals divine favor must be put aside for a more basic Christian theology: that relationship can be trusted. Jesus will trust. His understanding of God as Father will not yield to the apparent contradictions of the moment. Since “spirituality is applied doctrine”¹¹ Jesus bases his prayer on the character of the one he calls Father, *Abba*.

Conviction: I see that you are strong (“everything is possible for you”)

One of the primary requirements of Christian prayer is the belief in the ability of God to do what we ask of him. Prayer assumes that God is not only willing but also able to answer prayer. This means, of course, that prayer involves an understanding of God: his nature, character and purpose. In Biblical theology, God is not only Father, but the strong and loving Father: “*One thing God has spoken, two things have I heard: that you, O God, are strong, and that you, O Lord, are loving*” (Ps. 62:11-12). Love and strength are two aspects of the one character of God.

In his Gethsemane prayer, Jesus reveals his certainty concerning God’s strength. He is not doubtful of God’s power, or his transcendence over evil and injustice, or his will to defeat his enemies. Jesus is not uncertain of his Father’s will to oppose evil and to bring about good. This certainty was demonstrated throughout his ministry. Jesus is not subject to a kind of dualism where good and evil are locked in equal struggle – he clearly appeals to theistic sovereignty. This conviction will not waver through the test that

⁹ Dunn, p. 619

¹⁰ P.T. Forsyth. *The Soul of Prayer*. Vancouver, BC: Regent College, 1995. p. 49

¹¹ Kenneth Leech. *Soul Friend: The Practice of Christian Spirituality*. San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1980. p. 36

stands before him. Simply put, the petition that God would save him from his “hour” is an appeal to the saving strength of God. This is the logic of prayer, the understanding in which prayer operates. In prayer, humanity stands before the all-powerful God and pleads its case. Prayer can only operate in this theological vision of God, the one in whom all things are possible.

But more than the strength of God is at issue, for human weakness is also in view. The disciples are the obvious failures in this critical moment and their unaided, un-prayerful humanity is shown for what it is – insufficient to the test. They fail to understand the meaning of the moment just as they fail to act appropriately when their actions matter most. Jesus is left alone to fight the battle in prayer. His human strength is fully engaged and Luke records that supernatural strength is imparted to him through angelic ministrations (Luke 22:43). The struggle of prayer is fought within the confines of earthly and bodily existence where men do not always, nor often, do well. Failure is the human legacy. The embodied soul is weak.¹² But Jesus pushes through the weakness of his own body and as we will see, the uncertainties of his own spirit, to discover again the strength of God. In prayer, Jesus offers his own weakness to the strength of God, a certainty that he knows he will find in prayer. Spiritual strength and prayer are often acquainted in the life of Jesus.

But divine power is not something that Jesus assumes to be managed by men. Divine power is not a “force” that we tap in to; it is not an energy to be employed for our own purposes. God is personal and his power is ruled by his personal will. Certainly the appeal to God’s strength assumes that God’s righteousness is not a passive nor disinterested power but in harmony with his zealous righteousness. God, in other words, is jealous of his name and acts for the sake of his own honor. But he is also, as mentioned, this blend of love and strength. What God can do is tempered by what God wills to do for the sake of his love. Perhaps this then is the reason the synoptic gospels wrestle with this phrase in Mark’s version of the prayer: *“everything is possible for you”*. Matthew records, *“if it is possible”*, while Luke has it, *“if you are willing”*. Here we are faced with the mystery of power and love. Is it possible for God’s power to be exercised at the expense of love and mercy? Didn’t the OT prophets wrestle with these very questions? Somehow in Christ’s prayer, to say “everything is possible” is to say that both justice and mercy, righteousness and love are reconciled, and the way that they are reconciled is through the cross.

Prayer explores this mystery of what God can do and what God will do. It is always wrong to assert one side of the equation over against the other. Prayer always lives

¹² Matthew 26:42 draws out this aspect of the struggle for prayer which inevitably involves the dichotomy between divine strength and human weakness, seen most appropriately in the weakness of the body itself. Though the disciples fall asleep when they should be praying with Jesus, the situation is seen as almost normal. It is night after all, and they too are “exhausted from sorrow” (Lk 22:45). Their context is not conducive to bodily strength but for Jesus this means all the more that there is a need for persevering prayer. All of us who pray are acquainted with this reality, and it is often bodily weakness that wars against our best intentions.

within the tension. God is indeed able to do anything, except that he cannot deny himself. He cannot betray his mercy. And to this Jesus yields for he will be the instrument of God's mercy. This is the great surprise: that God in Christ becomes weak, and powerless. The request of Jesus is not so much denied, as it is put into a higher order. Power is sublimated to mercy in order that we might be saved. However we understand this startling petition of the Son of God, Jesus affirms the ultimate victory of God as well as the ultimate triumph of mercy and does not give in to temporary logical paradox.¹³

Intimacy: I can safely talk to you (“take this cup from me”)

P.T. Forsyth asserted that one of the primary purposes of true Christian prayer was the nurture of spiritual intimacy: “the great object of prayer is the opening or restoring of free communion”.¹⁴ Prayer's great gift is relationship with God so that, “every true prayer brings its answer with it” in the sense that what the pray-er seeks is God himself.¹⁵ Or, as Clement said, “prayer is keeping company with God”.¹⁶ The purpose of prayer must always have as its prime reward the gift of God himself in spiritual intimacy. This way of thinking re-conceptualizes answered prayer. God's first answer to prayer is the gift of his presence, the evidence that he has heard us. Whatever our earthly petition, there is a greater and more perfect purpose in prayer and that is to know God in a personal and existential sense. Our petitions are then taken up into that mysterious unfolding of all that God is and all that God wants. Certainly petition is essential to prayer, and there is no doubt that Jesus clearly and definitely asks his Father for deliverance from the trial before him. But foundational to his request is the spiritual intimacy he knows with his Father. As we will note later, he speaks freely. Although he has repeatedly taught his disciples of the divine necessity of the cross¹⁷, he now asks the Father for another way “if possible” – what are we to make of this? What are we to make of the intersection of human request and divine will?

¹³ The apparent logical problem of reconciling God's power and love with the presence of evil has been much discussed in intellectual history. In this way of thinking, if evil is real, then either God is not all-powerful or all-loving. But in the theology of Jesus which informs his prayer, God is both power and love; all is reconciled through the cross. In the cross of Jesus, God's power is displayed in his weakness, and his love is revealed in judgement upon sin. In the cross of Jesus, evil is absorbed into merciful love. The logical problems introduced by the limits of human thinking are taken into new territory and revealed as weak and insufficient. This is not to say that the cross has stopped thinkers from trying to solve the seemingly impenetrable “problem of evil”, but it does reveal to those who seek to live in Christ that we are always on the edge of fathomless mystery. In this regard, true Christian prayer allows us to use our minds in petitioning God but to leave the resolution of our concerns to God. That Jesus sought momentarily to escape the way of the cross is perhaps normal human psychology; but that he finally accepted the cross as God's way ultimately fulfilled his deepest desires. This is the way of overcoming faith. Jesus could therefore petition God truly and receive truly what he asked for. At all times, his petition had a deeper foundation than what he temporarily understood or felt. Jesus desired, of first priority, the will and way of God. This is the way of true believing prayer.

¹⁴ Forsyth, p. 17

¹⁵ Forsyth, p. 17

¹⁶ cited in James Houston. *The Transforming Friendship*. Oxford, UK: Lion Publishing, 1989. p. 6

¹⁷ In bold and in no uncertain terms, Jesus repeatedly teaches of the necessity (Gk. *dei*) of his suffering and death. In Mark's gospel, three definite teaching moments stand out in this regard: Mk 8:31; 9:31; 10:33.

We are here led into the paradox of prayer and it is essential to see that it is Jesus, the divine Son, who grants to us the freedom to explore this way with God. Prayer is always paradoxical because it lays at the interface of human action and divine sovereignty. On the one hand, prayer can easily become a scandal in our minds because of the great promises Jesus reveals to us: “*whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours*” (Mk. 11:24). Such amazing language is not here denied, but it is qualified. Certainly our petitions are to be made boldly, with great faith and energy. Making our petitions known to God is the acknowledgment of our human condition and our essential need of help. Jesus shows us how safe, how liberating, how good it is for us to petition God with all that is in us. In the tradition of the psalmists, we are to explore the open and free dialogue with God that is granted us. We can say to God what we couldn’t and shouldn’t say to others.¹⁸ And yet there is also something of depth and mystery beyond the exercise of human freedom that we frankly cannot bend. Our human freedom is real but it is not absolute; what we want is valued and often granted but not always. The place of prayer is where we learn to be in dialogue with God about this mystery and learn to fully express ourselves desires before God. We should see that this expression of desire is where intimacy is known and where relationship is deepened.

This is the way of *parrhesia*, which is one of the greatest of all gospel privileges. This NT word is variously translated “openness, confidence, boldness, frankness”.¹⁹ It represents the freedom of prayerful speech, the freedom to say all before God. It is obviously the way of Jesus in prayer and the “new and living way” (Heb. 10:20) opened for us through Jesus. In this we might say that freedom of speech before God is the fruit of a clear conscience before God, the conquest of the consciousness of sin, and the realization of real trust and relationship. Freedom of speech is what the Son has before the Father and therefore what we have in and through the Son. True Christian prayer embraces this new radical confidence before God. So Hebrews 4:16 is representative: “*Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence [parrhesia], so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need*” (cf. Heb. 10:19f). We speak freely with God because we stand as children of the new nature, asking according to his will (1 Jn. 5:14-15). The gospel confidence is that we find the freedom to express our desires before Father God without fear of recrimination or censure. While God works out his will in our lives, we find that in the full expression of our will before God we discover what it is we truly want. If we are God’s children, we ultimately want his will to be done.

C.S. Lewis was one those Christian romantics who affirmed human desire as essential to human nature. He said that our problem was not that we desired too much but that we

¹⁸ Note Ps. 73:15-17

¹⁹ “parrhesia”. *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology: Volume 2.* ed. Colin Brown. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976. pp. 734-737

desired too little, that our desires were too weak and easily pleased.²⁰ When it came to petitionary prayer, Lewis said that the need was to lay before God what was truly in us, not what we thought ought to be in us.²¹ In this task then, Lewis said that the prayer before all prayers is, “May it be the real I who speaks. May it be the real Thou that I speak to.”²²

Jesus is the model pray-er for us in this regard, precisely because he allowed his true human desire to be known to God. He desired greatly. He trusted that what he asked for would be interpreted by the Father who loved him and that he would be ultimately given what he truly wanted. The mystery of prayer is that God hears our hearts and interprets our words. Although God takes our words seriously, we are not beholden to them: what we ask for is always predicated on what we mean.

Relinquishment: I trust your vision of things (“yet not what I will but what you will”)

The Gethsemane prayer comes to a full and complete conclusion by its relinquishment to the divine will. Although Jesus has fully expressed his desire to be spared from the test before him, he ultimately submits himself to the Father’s greater purpose. In some internal way where “*deep calls to deep*” (Ps. 42:7), Jesus understood that his yielded will was the necessary answer to his struggle. Submitting to the Father’s purpose was the point of it all; the (natural) human desire to escape trial and pain was not his ultimate earthly purpose. When his prayer was done, the competing desires within him were placed in order. God’s will took the prior place.

P.T. Forsyth asserted that our prayer sums up our ruling passion.²³ Jesus’ passion, his whole life purpose, was for the will of God to be done, the kingdom of God to come. Therefore, the faith of Jesus was not simply in God’s ability (“*everything is possible with you*”) but more profoundly in God’s way (“*what you will*”). His prayer was not an attempt to wrestle out of God’s hand what God was reluctant to give, but to accept from God’s hand his – and all humanity’s – ultimate best. Jesus prayer was an act of trust that God saw better and more completely than his limited human perspective in the moment. Standing as representative man, the second Adam, the failure in the original garden was reversed. Adam’s sin was essentially to distrust God’s vision of things and to turn away from God’s word as the ordering principle for his human choice. Now, again in a garden, the Son will choose to trust God’s will and fully yield himself to the Father’s plan. Jesus, as representative man, here breaks the human mistrust of God. And the Son’s only resource at this crucial moment is believing prayer.

²⁰ C.S. Lewis. “The Weight of Glory”. *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*. San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001. p. 26

²¹ C.S. Lewis. *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*. New York, NY: Harcourt, 1992. p. 22

²² Lewis, p. 82

²³ Forsyth, p. 69

There is no denying the agony of Jesus in this act of trust. Such struggle is one of the paradoxes of prayer, that though prayer produces such profoundly wonderful fruit in our lives, and though it is often the greatest source of comfort we can experience in our humanity, it is often the thing we least want to do. Donald Bloesch called it simply “the struggle of prayer”²⁴ because it immerses us in the pain of our human situation. But in company with the believing community of history, Jesus does not pray for pain’s removal but for pain’s conversion.²⁵ He relinquishes his normal human desire to escape this cup of suffering in the hope that God will transform the cup to become one of blessing and redemption for others. He stands, therefore, in the company of the faithful who have corporately affirmed that obedience to God is ultimately rewarded. Nevertheless, from a salvation-history perspective, everything hinges on this moment – our redemption is opened up as possibility because Jesus accepts God’s way for him. The prayer of relinquishment to God’s will becomes a gift to others. It is the final moment of testing which Jesus wins through prayer. Satan’s subversions are crushed underfoot. The arrest, trial and crucifixion to follow are the working out of this prayer, where his will was yielded fully to the Father.

Conclusion

What is the legacy of the Gethsemane prayer of Jesus for us as his praying church? How does this prayer moment in the life of the Son of God stand as a continuing model for us? Several things emerge from this prayer which I want to comment on in closing. First, it should be obvious that true prayer involves so much more than asserting our rights and wants as God’s children. The tendency in my spiritual tradition (Pentecostal/Charismatic) has been to envision prayer as the exercise of making claims before God. Whatever rights Jesus had as the unique Son, he certainly did not feel that his will was the preeminent thing. As in the model prayer that he taught, the Gethsemane prayer asserted “*your will be done*”.

Secondly, this prayer reminds us that intimacy with God brings its own reward quite apart from anything else we might receive. Living truly in the world means that we will be brought face to face with the inherent broken-ness of the world; losses and crosses are the stuff of life. However, and this is the heart of the gospel privilege, the one thing we can know that we have in the world is a relationship with God as father. The history of praying in Jesus name has affirmed this most central gift; the primary gift of prayer is to say “Our Father”.

Finally, prayer is so much the fruit of our theology that we must see that poor praying is often the result of poor conceptualization. When our thoughts of God, life, self, and need is wrong, then our praying will be wrong and ultimately frustrated. Therefore, it is the Word of God as word of truth which is always our prayer primer; in the dialogue

²⁴ Donald Bloesch. *The Struggle of Prayer*. Colorado Springs, CO: Helmers & Howard, 1988.

²⁵ Forsyth, p. 47

with God and about God that we call theology we discover not only the promises of God but the will and way of God. A theology of spiritual application is therefore the greatest friend of the praying Christian. Certainly, by definition, God can do anything, but true prayer requires a larger view of God than merely that he has unlimited ability. Good theology tells us that God's power is focused, purposed, and lovingly expressed. Much of the Charismatic church, which I have ministered in for over two decades, has remained infantile in its prayers by failing to broaden its understanding of God. The God of Charismatic Christianity is often conceptualized as a God of sheer power who acts for those who pray in his name. But this reduces God to our will, our perspective. I would suggest that the Gethsemane prayer of Jesus forces the Charismatic view to take note of a counterbalancing truth, that the ability of God is wedded to the will of God, and that what God can do is not always what God purposes to do. The Gethsemane prayer reminds us that, in Jesus, power is wedded to mercy and to weakness. It reminds us that our prayers must operate on the understanding that raw power is not always the most merciful or wise choice.

Charismatic Christianity has taken full notice of the power of God for our time in history, something that I believe is right and necessary. God is certainly "able"; in this sense Jesus was a charismatic. But he was also an obedient Son who submitted to the idea that often God worked through the use of non-power, something we Charismatics must affirm as well. For in Gethsemane we are reminded that the cross is not simply history past but history present, the central metaphor for the sufferings which we still struggle with. In Gethsemane we are reminded that God's greatest gifts are often enabled by our darkest trials, even those moments when God seems most absent. In Gethsemane we are reminded that resurrection power is the ultimate answer to those who yield themselves to the Father wholly and completely. The prayer of Gethsemane is, paradoxically, one of the great answered prayers. In the life of Jesus, it is an application of the model prayer Jesus taught us when he said, "Our Father...