

Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit.

THE PREPARATORY PRAYERS OF CHRIST.

A Sermon

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DELIVERED BY

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"Now when all the peop'e were baptized, it came to pass, that Jesus also being baptized, and praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Ghost descended in a bodily shape like a dove upon him, and a voice came from heaven, which said, Thou art my beloved Son; in thee I am well pleased."—Luke iii. 21, 22.

"And it came to pass in those days, that he went out into a mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God. And when it was day, he called unto him his disciples: and of them he chose twelve, whom also he named apostles."—Luke vi. 12, 13.

"And it came to pass about an eight days after these sayings, he took Peter and John and James, and went up into a mountain to pray. And as he prayed, the fashion of his countenance was altered, and his raiment was white and glistening."—Luke ix. 28, 29.

"And when he had sent the multitudes away, he went up into a mountain apart to pray: and when the evening was come, he was there alone. But the ship was now in the midst of the sea, tossed with waves: for the wind was contrary. And in the fourth watch of the night Jesus went unto them, walking on the sea."—Matthew xiv. 23—25.

"Then they took away the stone from the place where the dead was laid. And Jesus lifted up his eyes, and said, Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me. And I knew that thou hearest me always: but because of the people which stand by I said it, that they may believe that thou hast sent me."—John xi. 41, 42.

"And the Lord said, Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: but I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren."—Luke xxii. 31, 32.

"And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit: and having said thus, he gave up the ghost."—Luke xxiii. 46.

THERE is one peculiarity about the life of our Lord Jesus Christ which everybody must have noticed who has carefully read the four Gospels, namely, that he was a man of much prayer. He was mighty as a preacher; for even the officers who were sent to arrest him said, "Never man spake like this man." But he appears to have been even mightier in prayer, if such a thing could be possible. We do not read that his disciples ever asked him to teach them to preach, but we are told that, "as he was praying in a certain place,

when he ceased, one of his disciples said unto him, Lord, teach us to pray." He had no doubt been praying with such wonderful fervour that his disciples realized that he was a master of the holy art of prayer, and they therefore desired to learn the secret for themselves. The whole life of our Lord Jesus Christ was one of prayer. Though we are often told about his praying, we feel that we scarcely need to be informed of it, for we know that he must have been a man of prayer. His acts are the acts of a prayerful man; his words speak to us like the words of one whose heart was constantly lifted up in prayer to his Father. You could not imagine that he would have breathed out such blessings upon men if he had not first breathed in the atmosphere of heaven. He must have been much in prayer or he could not have been so abundant in service and so gracious in sympathy.

Prayer seems to be like a silver thread running through the whole of our Saviour's life, yet we have the record of his prayers on many special occasions; and it struck me that it would be both interesting and instructive for us to notice some of the seasons which Jesus spent in prayer. I have selected a few which occurred either before some great work or some great suffering, so our subject will really be the preparatory prayers of Christ, the prayers of Christ as he was approaching something which would put a peculiar stress and strain upon his manhood, either for service or for suffering; and if the consideration of this subject shall lead all of us to learn the practical lesson of praying at all times, and yet to have special seasons for prayer just before any peculiar trial or unusual service, we shall not have met in vain.

I. The first prayer we are to consider is OUR LORD'S PRAYER IN PREPARATION FOR HIS BAPTISM. It is in Luke iii. 21, 22: "Now when all the people were baptized, it came to pass, that Jesus also being baptized, and praying," (it seems to have been a continuous act in which he had been previously occupied,) "the heaven was opened, and the Holy Ghost descended in a bodily shape like a dove upon him, and a voice came from heaven, which said, Thou art my beloved Son; in thee I am well pleased."

The baptism of our Lord was the commencement of his manifestation to the sons of men. He was now about to take upon himself in full all the works of his Messiahship; and, consequently, we find him very specially engaged in prayer; and, beloved, it seems to me to be peculiarly appropriate that, when any of us have been converted, and are about to make a Scriptural profession of our faith,—about to take up the soldier-life under the great Captain of our salvation,—about to start out as pilgrims on Zion's city bound,—I say that it seems to me to be peculiarly appropriate for us to spend much time in very special prayer. I should be very sorry to think that anyone would venture to come to be baptized, or to be united with a Christian church, without having made that action a matter of much solemn consideration and earnest prayer; but when the decisive step is about to be taken, our whole being should be very specially concentrated upon our supplication at the throne of grace. Of course, we do not believe in any sacramental efficacy attaching

to the observance of the ordinance, but we receive a special blessing in the act itself because we are moved to pray even more than usual before it takes place and at the time. At all events, I know that it was so in my own case. It was many years ago, but the remembrance of it is very vivid at this moment, and it seems to me as though it only happened yesterday. It was in the month of May, and I rose very early in the morning, so that I might have a long time in private prayer. Then I had to walk about eight miles, from Newmarket to Isleham, where I was to be baptized in the river; and I think that the blessing I received that day resulted largely from that season of solitary supplication, and my meditation, as I walked along the country roads and lanes, upon my indebtedness to my Saviour, and my desire to live to his praise and glory. Dear young people, take care that you start right in your Christian life by being much in prayer. A profession of faith that does not begin with prayer will end in disgrace. If you come to join the church, but do not pray to God to uphold you in consistency of life, and to make your profession sincere, the probability is that you are already a hypocrite; or if that is too uncharitable a suggestion, the probability is that, if you are converted, the work has been of a very superficial character, and not of that deep and earnest kind of which prayer would be the certain index. So again I say to you that, if any of you are thinking of making a profession of your faith in Christ, be sure that, in preparation for it, you devote a special season to drawing near to God in prayer.

As I read the first text, no doubt you noticed that it was while Christ was praying that "the heaven was opened, and the Holy Ghost descended in a bodily shape like a dove upon him, and a voice came from heaven, which said, Thou art my beloved Son; in thee I am well pleased." There are three occasions, of which we read in Scripture, when God bore audible testimony to Christ, and on each of these three occasions he was either in the act of prayer or he had been praying but a very short time before. Christ's prayer is specially mentioned in each instance side by side with the witness of his Father; and if you, beloved friends, want to have the witness of God either at your baptism or on any subsequent act of your life, you must obtain it by prayer. The Holy Ghost never sets his seal to a prayerless religion. It has not in it that of which he can approve. It must be truly said of a man, "Behold, he prayeth," before the Lord bears such testimony concerning him as he bore concerning Saul of Tarsus, "He is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles."

So we find that it was while Christ was praying, at his baptism, that the Holy Ghost came upon him, "in a bodily shape like a dove," to qualify him for his public service; and it is through prayer that we also receive that spiritual enrichment that equips us as co-workers together with God. Without prayer, you will remain in a region that is desolate as a desert; but bend your knees in supplication to the Most High, and you have reached the land of promise, the country of benediction. "Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you," not merely as to his gracious presence,

but as to the powerful and efficacious working of the Holy Spirit. More prayer, more power; the more pleading with God that there is, the more power will there be in pleading with men, for the Holy Ghost will come upon us while we are pleading, and so we shall be fitted and qualified to do the work to which we are called of God.

Let us learn, then, from this first instance of our Saviour's preparatory prayer, at his baptism, the necessity of special supplication on our part in similar circumstances. If we are making our first public profession of faith in him, or if we are renewing that profession, if we are removing to another sphere of service, if we are taking office in the church as deacons or elders, if we are commencing the work of the pastorate, if we are in any way coming out more distinctly before the world as the servants of Christ, let us set apart special seasons for prayer, and so seek a double portion of the Holy Spirit's blessing to rest upon us.

II. The second instance of the preparatory prayers of Christ which we are to consider is OUR LORD'S PRAYER PREPARATORY TO CHOOSING HIS TWELVE APOSTLES. It is recorded in Luke vi. 12, 13: "And it came to pass in those days, that he went out into a mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God.* And when it was day, he called unto him his disciples: and of them he chose twelve, whom also he named apostles."

Our Lord was about to extend his ministry; his one tongue, his one voice, might have delivered his personal message throughout Palestine, but he was desirous of having far more done than he could individually accomplish in the brief period of his public ministry upon the earth. He would therefore have twelve apostles, and afterwards seventy disciples, who would go forth in his name, and tell out the glad tidings of salvation. He was infinitely wiser than the wisest of mere men, so why did he not at once select his twelve apostles? The men had been with him from the beginning, and he knew their characters, and their fitness for the work he was about to entrust to them; so he might have said to himself, "I will have James, and John, and Peter, and the rest of the twelve, and send them forth to preach that the kingdom of heaven is at hand, and to exercise the miraculous powers with which I will endow them." He might have done this if he had not been the Christ of God; but being the anointed of the Father, he would not take such an important step as that without long-continued prayer, so he went alone to his Father, told him all that he desired to do, and pleaded with him, not in the brief fashion that we call prayer, which usually lasts only a few minutes, but his pleading lasted through an entire night.

What our Lord asked for, or how he prayed, we cannot tell, for it is not revealed to us; but I think we shall not be guilty of vain or unwarranted curiosity if we use our imagination for a minute or two. In doing so, with the utmost reverence, I think I hear Christ crying to his Father that the right men might be selected as the leaders of the Church of God upon the earth. I think I also hear him pleading that upon these chosen men a divine influence might

* See *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, No. 798, "Special Protracted Prayer."

rest, that they might be kept in character, honest in heart, and holy in life, and that they might also be preserved sound in doctrine, and not turn aside to error and falsehood. Then I think I hear him praying that success might attend their preaching, that they might be guided where to go, where the blessing of God would go with them, that they might find many hearts willing to receive their testimony, and that, when their personal ministry should end, they might pass on their commission to others, so that, as long as there should be a harvest to be reaped for the Lord, there should be labourers to reap it; as long as there should be lost sinners in the world, there should also be earnest, consecrated men and women seeking to pluck the brands from the burning. I will not attempt to describe the mighty wrestlings of that night of prayer when, in strong crying and tears, Christ poured out his very soul into his Father's ear and heart. But it is clear that he would not despatch a solitary messenger with the glad tidings of the gospel unless he was assured that his Father's authority and the Spirit's power would accompany the servants whom he was about to send forth.

What a lesson there is in all this to us! What infallible guidance there is here as to how a missionary society should be conducted! Where there is one committee meeting for business, there ought to be fifty for prayer; and whenever we get a missionary society whose main business it is to pray, we shall have a society whose distinguishing characteristic will be that it is the means of saving a multitude of souls. And to you, my dear young brethren in the College, I feel moved to say that I believe we shall have a far larger blessing than we have already had when the spirit of prayer in the College is greater than it now is, though I rejoice to know that it is very deep and fervent even now. You, brethren, have never been lacking in prayerfulness; I thank God that I have never had occasion to complain or to grieve on that account; but, still, who knows what blessing might follow a night of prayer at the beginning or at any part of the session, or an all-night wrestling in prayer in the privacy of your own bedrooms? Then, when you go out to preach the gospel on the Sabbath day, you will find that the best preparation for preaching is much praying. I have always found that the meaning of a text can be better learned by prayer than in any other way. Of course, we must consult lexicons and commentaries to see the literal meaning of the words, and their relation to one another; but when we have done all that, we shall still find that our greatest help will come from prayer. Oh, that every Christian enterprise were commenced with prayer, continued with prayer, and crowned with prayer! Then might we also expect to see it crowned with God's blessing. So once again I remind you that our Saviour's example teaches us that, for seasons of special service, we need not only prayers of a brief character, excellent as they are for ordinary occasions, but special protracted wrestling with God like that of Jacob at the brook Jabbok, so that each one of us can say to the Lord, with holy determination,—

“With thee all night I mean to stay,
And wrestle till the break of day.”

When such sacred persistence in prayer as this becomes common throughout the whole Church of Christ, Satan's long usurpation will be coming to an end, and we shall be able to say to our Lord, as the seventy disciples did when they returned to him with joy, "Even the devils are subject unto us through thy name."

III. Now, thirdly, let us consider OUR LORD'S PRAYER PREPARATORY TO HIS TRANSFIGURATION. You will find it in Luke ix. 28, 29: "And it came to pass about an eight days after these sayings, he took Peter and John and James, and went up into a mountain to pray. And as he prayed, the fashion of his countenance was altered, and his raiment was white and glistening." You see that it was as he prayed that he was transfigured.

Now, beloved, do you really desire to reach the highest possible attainments of the Christian life? Do you, in your inmost soul, pine and pant after the choicest joys that can be known by human beings this side of heaven? Do you aspire to rise to full fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ, and to be transformed into his image from glory to glory? If so, the way is open to you; it is the way of prayer, and only there will you find these priceless boons. If you fail in prayer, you will assuredly never come to Tabor's top. There is no hope, dear friends, of our ever attaining to anything like a transfiguration, and being covered with the light of God, so that whether in the body or out of the body we cannot tell, unless we are much in prayer.

I believe that we make more real advance in the divine life in an hour of prayer than we do in a month of sermon-hearing. I do not mean that we are to neglect the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but I am sure that, without the praying, the hearing is of little worth. We must pray, we must plead with God if we are really to grow spiritually. In prayer, very much of our spiritual digestion is done. When we are hearing the Word, we are very much like the cattle when they are cropping the grass; but when we follow our hearing with meditation and prayer, we do, as it were, lie down in the green pastures, and get the rich nutriment for our souls out of the truth. My dear brother or sister in Christ, wouldst thou shake off the earthliness that still clings to thee? Wouldst thou get rid of thy doubting and thy fearing? Wouldst thou overcome thy worldliness? Wouldst thou master all thy besetting sins? Wouldst thou glow and glisten in the brightness and glory of the holiness of God? Then, be much in prayer, as Jesus was. I am sure that it must be so, and that, apart from prayer, you will make no advance in the divine life; but that, in waiting upon God, you shall renew your spiritual strength, you shall mount up with wings as eagles, you shall run, and not be weary, you shall walk, and not faint.

IV. I must hasten on, lest time should fail us before I have finished; and I must put together two of OUR LORD'S PRAYERS PREPARATORY TO GREAT MIRACLES.

The first, which preceded his stilling of the tempest on the lake of Gennesaret, is recorded in Matthew xiv. 23—25: "And when he had sent the multitudes away, he went up into a mountain apart

to pray: and when the evening was come, he was there alone. But the ship was now in the midst of the sea, tossed with waves: for the wind was contrary. And in the fourth watch of the night Jesus went unto them, walking on the sea." He had been pleading with his Father for his disciples; and then, when their ship was tossed by the waves, and driven back by the contrary winds, he came down to them from the lofty place where he had been praying for them, making a pathway for himself across the turbulent waters that he was about to calm. Before he walked upon those tossing billows, he had prayed to his Father; before he stilled the storm, he had prevailed with God in prayer.

Am I to do any great work for God? Then I must first be mighty upon my knees. Is there a man here who is to be the means of covering the sky with clouds, and bringing the rain of God's blessing upon the dry and barren church which so sorely needs reviving and refreshing? Then he must be prepared for that great work as Elijah was when, on the top of Carmel, "he cast himself down upon the earth, and put his face between his knees," and prayed as only he could pray. We shall never see a little cloud, like a man's hand, which shall afterwards cover all the sky with blackness, unless first of all we know how to cry mightily unto the Most High; but when we have done that, then shall we see what we desire. Moses would never have been able to control the children of Israel as he did if he had not first been in communion with his God in the desert, and afterwards in the mount. So, if we are to be men of power, we also must be men of prayer.

The other instance to which I want to refer, showing how our Lord prayed before working a mighty miracle, is when he stood by the grave of Lazarus. You will find the account of it in John xi. 41, 42: "Then they took away the stone from the place where the dead was laid. And Jesus lifted up his eyes, and said, Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me. And I knew that thou hearest me always: but because of the people which stand by I said it, that they may believe that thou hast sent me." He did not cry, "Lazarus, come forth," so that the people heard it, and Lazarus heard it, until first he had prayed, "My Father, grant that Lazarus may rise from the dead," and had received the assurance that he would do so as soon as he was called by Christ to come forth from the grave.

But, brethren, do you not see that, if Christ, who was so strong, needed to pray thus, what need there is for us, who are so weak, also to pray? If he, who was God as well as man, prayed to his Father before he wrought a miracle, how needful it is for us, who are merely men, to go to the throne of grace, and plead there with importunate fervency if we are ever to do anything for God! I fear that many of us have been feeble out here in public because we have been feeble out there on the lone mountain side where we ought to have been in fellowship with God. The way to be fitted to work what men will call wonders is to go to the God of wonders, and implore him to gird us with his all-sufficient strength that so we may do exploits to his praise and glory.

V. The next prayer we are to consider is OUR LORD'S PRAYER PREPARATORY TO PETER'S FALL. We have the record of that in Luke xxii. 31, 32: "And the Lord said, Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: but I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren."*

There is much that is admirable and instructive in this utterance of our Lord. Satan had not then tempted Peter, yet Christ had already pleaded for the apostle whose peril he clearly foresaw. Some of us would have thought that we were very prompt if we had prayed for a brother who had been tempted, and who had yielded to the temptation; but our Lord prayed for Peter before he was tempted. As soon as Satan had desired to have him in his sieve, that he might sift him as wheat, our Saviour knew the thought that was formed in the diabolic mind, and he at once pleaded for his imperilled servant, who did not even know the danger that was threatening him. Christ is ever beforehand with us. Before the storm comes, he has provided the harbour of refuge; before the disease attacks us, he has the remedy ready to cure it; his mercy outruns our misery.

What a lesson we ought to learn from this action of Christ! Whenever we see any friend in peril through temptation, let us not begin to talk about him, but let us at once pray for him. Some persons are very fond of hinting and insinuating about what is going to happen to certain people with whom they are acquainted. I pray you, beloved friends, not to do so. Do not hint that So-and-so is likely to fall, but pray that he may not fall. Do not insinuate anything about him to others, but tell the Lord what your anxiety is concerning him.

"But So-and-so has made a lot of money, and he is getting very purse-proud." Well, even if it is so, do not talk about him to others, but pray God to grant that he may not be allowed to become purse-proud. Do not say that he will be, but pray constantly that he may not be, and do not let anyone but the Lord know that you are praying for him.

"Then there is So-and-so; he is so elated with the success he has had that one can scarcely get to speak to him." Well, then, brother, pray that he may not be elated. Do not say that you are afraid he is growing proud, for that would imply what you would yourself be if you were in his place. Your fear reveals a secret concerning your own nature, for what you judge that he would be is exactly what you would be in similar circumstances. We always measure other people's corn with our own bushel; we do not borrow their bushel; and we can judge ourselves by our judgment of others. Let us cease these censures and judgments, and let us pray for our brethren. If you fear that a minister is somewhat turning aside from the faith, or if you think that his ministry is not so profitable as it used to be, or if you see any other imperfection in him, do not go and talk about it to people in the street, for they cannot set

* See *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, No. 2,620, "Christ's Prayer for Peter;" and Nos. 2 034-5 (a double number), "Peter's Restoration," and "Peter after his Restoration."

him right; but go and tell his Master about him, pray for him, and ask the Lord to make right whatever is wrong. There is a sermon by old Matthew Wilks about our being epistles of Christ, written not with ink, and not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart; and he said that ministers are the pens with which God writes on their hearers' hearts, and that pens need nibbing every now and then, and even when they are well nibbed they cannot write without ink; so he said that the best service that the people could render to the preacher was to pray the Lord to give them new nibs, and dip them in the ink afresh, that they might write better than before. Do so, dear friends; do not blot the page with your censures and unkind remarks, but help the preacher by pleading for him even as Christ prayed for Peter.

VI. Now I must close with OUR LORD'S PREPARATORY PRAYER JUST BEFORE HIS DEATH. You will find it in Luke xxiii. 46: "And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit: and having said thus, he gave up the ghost."*

Our Lord Jesus was very specially occupied in prayer as the end of his earthly life drew near. He was about to die as his people's Surety and Substitute; the wrath of God, which was due to them, fell upon him. Knowing all that was to befall him, "he set his face steadfastly to go unto Jerusalem;" and, in due time, he "endured the cross, despising the shame;" but he did not go to Gethsemane and Golgotha without prayer. Son of God as he was, he would not undergo that terrible ordeal without much supplication. You know how much there is about his praying in the later chapters of John's Gospel. There is especially that great prayer of his for his Church, in which he pleaded with wonderful fervour for those whom his Father had given him. Then there was his agonized pleading in Gethsemane, when his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground." We will not say much about that, but we can well imagine that the bloody sweat was the outward and visible expression of the intense agony of his soul, which was "exceeding sorrowful, even unto death."

All that Christ did and suffered was full of prayer, so it was but fitting that his last utterance on earth should be the prayerful surrender of his spirit into the hands of his Father. He had already pleaded for his murderers, "Father, forgive them: for they know not what they do." He had promised to grant the request of the penitent thief, "Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom." Now nothing remained for him to do but to say, "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit: and having said thus, he gave up the ghost." His life, which had been a life of prayer, was thus closed with prayer,—an example well worthy of his people's imitation.

Perhaps I am addressing someone who is conscious that a serious illness is threatening. Well then, dear friend, prepare for it by prayer. Are you dreading a painful operation? Nothing will help you to bear it so well as pleading with God concerning it. Prayer

* See *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, No. 2,311, "Our Lord's Last Cry from the Cross;" and No. 2,644, "The Last Words of Christ on the Cross."

will help you mentally as well as physically; you will face the ordeal with far less fear if you have laid your case before the Lord, and committed yourself, body, soul, and spirit, into his hands. If you are expecting, ere long, to reach the end of your mortal life, either because of your advanced age, or your weak constitution, or the inroads of the deadly consumption, pray much. You need not fear to be baptized in Jordan's swelling flood if you are constantly being baptized in prayer. Think of your Saviour in the garden and on the cross, and pray even as he did, "Not my will, but thine, be done. . . . Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit."

While I have been speaking thus to believers in our Lord Jesus Christ, there may have been some here, who are still unconverted, who have imagined that prayer is the way to heaven; yet it is not. Prayer is a great and precious help on the road, but Christ alone is the Way, and the very first step heavenward is to trust ourselves wholly to him. Faith in Christ is the all-important matter; and if thou truly believest in him, thou art saved. But the very first thing that a saved man does is to pray, and the very last thing that he does before he gets to heaven is to pray. Well did Montgomery write,—

"Prayer is the contrite sinner's voice,
Returning from his ways;
While angels in their songs rejoice,
And cry, 'Behold, he prays!'"

"Prayer is the Christian's vital breath,
The Christian's native air;
His watchword at the gates of death:
He enters heaven with prayer."

Exposition by C. H. Spurgeon.

LUKE XVIII. 1—14.

Verse 1. *And he spake a parable unto them to this end, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint;**

An old writer says that many of Christ's parables need a key to unlock them. Here, the key hangs outside the door; for, at the very beginning of the parable, we are told what Christ meant to teach by it: "that men ought always to pray, and not to faint." And this is the parable:—

2. *Saying, There was in a city a judge, which feared not God, neither regarded man:*

It is a great pity for any city and for any country where the judges do not fear God, where they feel that they have been put into a high office in which they may do just as they please. There were such judges in the olden times even in this land; God grant that we may not see any more like them!

3. *And there was a widow in that city; and she came unto him, saying, Avenge me of mine adversary.*

She had no friend to plead for her, she had nobody to help her; and,

* See *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, No. 2,519, "When should we Pray?"