

Punctuated by Prayer
By Bill Lawson

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Jesus found respite, relief, and empowerment in prayer, and we can, too. His miracles, preaching, teaching, and healing were often punctuated by intervals of prayer. Jesus often withdrew from even his closest friends to spend substantial amounts of time praying. Sometimes he shared these moments with a few others, but usually, they were spent in solitude. These were personal focused times apart with God, in addition to the ongoing constant communion Paul referenced in First Thessalonians 5:17, "Pray without ceasing."

Jesus had a pattern of withdrawing for prayer between ministry events.

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. (*Matthew 14:23 KJV*)

After feeding the five thousand, Jesus sent the disciples to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. He sent the multitude away to their homes and families.

Then Jesus went up into the mountain – perhaps Mount Arbel -- to pray. There are very few instances in the Gospels where the content of Jesus' prayers is revealed. We gain some insights into how Jesus experienced prayer as we reflect on such events as the Wilderness Temptation, the Transfiguration, and the Prayer in the Garden.

We also have received a wonderful gift of the Lord's Prayer, which brings us into the most universally ecumenical moment of sharing the mind of Christ across all generations and cultures, despite the devices sometimes used to create divisions around the translation of particular words or which Gospel reference is committed to memory. The Lord's Prayer was given and continues to be received as an example of what to pray for and a sample pattern for our thoughts as we approach the Throne of Grace and Mercy. One version of the Lord's Prayer was given in the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus talked about the value of almsgiving, fasting, and prayer in complete seclusion and anonymity. "And your father who sees in secret shall reward thee openly."¹ The other version was given in response to the request of one of his disciples, "Teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples."²

The prayers of Jesus, as mentioned in the Bible, were usually in solitude as part of a personal, private relationship with God and the other people with whom he prayed, such as the disciples on some occasions and people from previous ages who had passed on to glory on other occasions. Perhaps the communion Charles Wesley characterized of "saints on earth and those above"³ would best describe not only the prayer life of Jesus but the invitation of the Bible to each of us for our own experiences in prayer.

Jesus seemed to have found revitalization in these moments of respite, away from whatever demands and challenges were part of his relationships and interactions with others. They were times of renewed focus and strength as he shifted from one form of ministry to the next. Even empowerment was mentioned in an incident involving an epileptic child⁴ his apostles could not cure. After Jesus healed the child, the disciples asked why they could not. After another of his frequent explanations about their "little faith," he added, "Howbeit this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting."⁵ Two events, in particular, allude to the presence of attending angels ministering to Jesus in his most difficult times: during the Wilderness Temptation after his

baptism and during the Prayer in the Garden before the Crucifixion.

Back to the prayer after the feeding of the multitude. Jesus spent the evening alone, and although the Bible doesn't say for how long, it does put the feeding miracle in the late afternoon and the beginning of his walk on the water during the 4th watch, which John Wesley said would have been after 3:00 am.⁶ So at least six or eight hours plus the time it took to go up and come back down the mountain. Then Jesus headed out on foot across the water.

As Jesus drew near the boat where the disciples were struggling against the wind, they saw him from a distance and were understandably spooked by the sight of a person walking on the water. Jesus calmed their fears somewhat by announcing his presence. Peter asked for an invitation to join him, and Jesus complied. Peter's short walk on the water went well until his faith ran out and gave way to fear. He cried out the primal prayer, "Lord, save me." Many people have prayed similar prayers in situations of varying degrees of distress. Perhaps "Lord, help me" comes in as a close second to the Lord's Prayer as one of humanity's most frequently prayed prayers.

Jesus answered Peter's prayer by extending his hand to Peter and pulling him from the waters providing a metaphor for the future hymn "Love Lifted Me," by James Rowe, and the stanza "from the waters lifted me -- now safe am I."⁷ They returned to the boat, the wind ceased, and the disciples affirmed their faith in Jesus as the Son of God.

The story of Jesus and Peter walking on the water has become an eternal allegory for all believers of every generation. We are invited to deepen our faith, trusting God to meet us in any crisis, calm any storm, and empower us to participate in the mission and ministry of Jesus. We unite with those on the lake with Jesus in affirming our faith and declaring, "Of a truth, thou art the Son of God." (vs 33 KJV).

Listen for the impressions God makes in the stillness and tranquility of our souls.

And after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice. (*1 Kings 19:12 KJV*)

Earthquake, wind, and fire... perhaps an early suggestion for a rock and roll musical group. These are the kinds of flamboyant and spectacular events many people have historically sought as evidence of the divine presence. But then they usually blame the consequences of the ensuing calamities as "acts of God" and fabricate stories about how God sent those awful events to destroy people for whatever wrongdoings they suspect must have brought down God's relentless wrath.

Those superstitions are born out of the fear that God is hostile to humanity and seeks to ruin and destroy people for even the least perceived infractions. They misinterpret verses like Hebrews 12:29, "Our God is a consuming fire,"⁸ which John Wesley interpreted as "in the strictness of his justice, and purity of his holiness."⁹ But some interpret them to paint a picture of God in the most evil of terms and then brand it as a sort of righteousness. Thoughtless interpretations like that are like the old joke of understanding the Book of Hebrews as a command about who makes the coffee. They point to the smoke and fire on Mt. Sinai, where Moses met God to receive the commandments, even though Moses returned not only unscathed but with the glory of God shining from his face. The Book of Exodus depicts the

sight as certainly one to behold. Everyone feared approaching Mt. Sinai because of the fire, smoke, lighting, and rumblings. Many Old Testament allegories were created around the spectacular destructive forces attributed to God's supposed emotional state of seething anger bent on extreme vengeance.

Yet, when God hid Elijah in the cleft of the rock, Elijah discovered that God wasn't in these awful and terrifying events. Rather, God was in the stillness that followed them, "the still small voice." It is in the calm after the storm, often accompanied by the response of good people offering recovery assistance, where we find and affirm God's love. The Creation Narratives picture God as "walking [with Adam and Eve] in the garden in the cool of the day."¹⁰ Through the prophet, Isaiah, one of God's invitations to humanity is, "Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord."¹¹ God self-identifies with Jesus of Nazareth, who personifies the Good Shepherd of Psalm 23, and is described in the New Testament as the one in whom dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily."¹²

All the facets of God's nature are reconciled in love.

With the Psalmist, we praise God for the promises of peace and presence. "I am listening to what the Lord God is saying," says the Psalmist in the Good News Translation of Psalm 85:8. God's salvation is close, and God's presence is within and among us. We are invited into the balance represented by the metaphors of verse 10:

Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other.
(*Psalm 85:10 KJV*)

Taken as a literal, historical, scientific fact, this sounds very romantic. But alas, like much of the Old Testament, this kiss is a metaphor. Like two sides of the same coin, righteousness and peace go together, reconciled by perfect love to a balanced state of harmony. Apart, they are neither; together, they are both. As the saying goes, "No justice, no peace; know justice, know peace." Likewise, mercy and truth together are tempered in love but separately can be incomplete and even at times, harsh.

Salvation awaits everyone.

For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. (*Romans 10:13 KJV*)

Salvation is multi-dimensional. We are rescued from immediate dangers. We are healed from the adverse effects we have suffered. We are preserved body and soul unto everlasting life, as described in our Communion liturgies.¹³ We are being saved, sanctified, and filled with the Holy Ghost through the grace and love of God that initiated a personal saving relationship with us each before we ever were aware of it, and that will continue throughout all of eternity, "world without end, Amen!"¹⁴

Charles Wesley wrote in his hymn, "And Are We Yet Alive."¹⁵

Preserved by power divine
To full salvation here,
Again in Jesus' praise we join,
And in His sight appear.

But out of all the Lord
 Hath brought us by His love;
 And still He doth His help afford,
 And hides our life above.

Then let us make our boast
 Of His redeeming power,
 Which saves us to the uttermost,
 Till we can sin no more.

When someone is ready to turn to God, God is already there, like the parent in the Parable of the Prodigal, already waiting for that moment with open arms. Like Peter, we cry out, “Lord, save me,” and the response is instant. The thief on the cross turned to Jesus and said, “Remember me when you come into your kingdom.”¹⁶ That, in the mind of Jesus, was completely sufficient to warrant his saving promise, “Today you will be with me in Paradise.”¹⁷

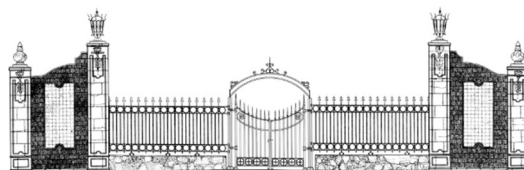
There are no time limits or preconditions for salvation, and no one is excluded for any reason. The most primal prayer, even from a person sinking in fear and hopelessness, engages us in the saving personal relationship with our Creator, whose response is always to reciprocate in love, with peace and reconciliation. The great intention of God, echoed by Paul¹⁸ is that everyone who ever lived will eventually worship God and acknowledge Christ.

Conclusion

Prayer is at least as much about our listening as about our speaking, about what we hear, at least as much as about what we say. At the Transfiguration, Jesus’ disciples heard God speak from heaven during their shared prayer time with Elijah and Moses, as worded in The Message, “This is my Son, marked by my love, focus of my delight. Listen to him.”¹⁹ Jesus pointed out in the Sermon on the Mount just before giving the Lord’s Prayer that God already knows what we need before we ask, so we don’t need to “use a lot of meaningless words,” as it says in the Good News Translation.²⁰

We know that God already knows what we are thinking about, but do we know what God is thinking about – what God is trying to communicate to us? Prayer is an opportunity for us to engage with our Creator and receive the guidance and comfort of the Holy Spirit, as Jesus promised she would give us. Listen for the “still small voice.” Perhaps if our activities were more punctuated by prayer, then “oh ye of *little* faith” might become “oh ye of a little *more* faith.”

In the Name of Jesus, Amen.



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Bible Readings for the 11th Sunday after Pentecost, Revised Common Lectionary
1 Kings 19:9-18, Psalm 85:8-13, Romans 10:5-15, Matthew 14:22-33

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Notes

¹ Matthew 5:6 (KJV).

² Luke 11:1 (KJV).

³ Charles Wesley. "The Saints of Earth and Those Above," 1759. *Hymnary*. hymnary.org/text/the_saints_of_earth_and_those_above 12 August 2023.

⁴ Matthew 17:14 (NRSV, GNT).

⁵ Matthew 17:21 (KJV).

⁶ John Wesley. "Matthew 14." Explanatory Notes. Bible Commentaries. *Bible Study Tools*. www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/wesleys-explanatory-notes/matthew/matthew-14.html Accessed 12 August 2023.

⁷ James Rowe. "Love Lifted Me," 1912. *Hymnary*.

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¹⁰ Genesis 3:8 (KJV).

¹¹ Isaiah 1:18 (KJV).

¹² Colossians 2:9 (KJV).

¹³ The United Methodist Church. "A Service of Word and Table IV." *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, p. 50. Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992. Print.

¹⁴ The United Methodist Church. "Glory Be to the Father," Lesser Doxology, 3rd-4th centuries. *The United Methodist Hymnal*, No. 70. Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989. Print.

¹⁵ Wesley, Charles. "And Are We Yet Alive," 1749. *Hymnary*.
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¹⁶ Luke 23:42 (NRSV).

¹⁷ Luke 23:43 (NRSV).

¹⁸ Philippians 2:10-11.

¹⁹ Matthew 17:5 (MSG).

²⁰ Matthew 6:7 (GNT).

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