

A STUDY OF PRAYER IN THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

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Prayer always has been, and always will be, a staple of Christian practice. Jesus devotes much time both in prayer and teaching his disciples to pray. All four of the gospels devote time and space to the subject of prayer. According to Lindell Harris, though, the gospel of Luke has more to say about prayer than any of the other gospels.¹ Therefore, it is easy for one to gather that Luke held a high regard for the institution of prayer. In fact, P. T. O'Brien has stated that "prayer is a significant motif in the Lukan writings as both the terminology and the contexts make plain."² This paper seeks to explore Luke's treatment of prayer by separating the instances of prayer into two categories: the prayers of Jesus in Luke and prayer as didactic in Luke.

INSTANCES OF PRAYER IN LUKE

According to K. S. Han, Luke uses two Greek words translated for prayer a total of forty-one times in his gospel. The verb *proseukomai*, and its noun form *proseuke*, are used twenty-two times while the verb *deesis* is used nineteen times.³ When the use of *proseukomai* in Luke is combined with that in Acts, it totals thirty-five times (out of a total eighty-six uses in the New Testament).⁴ This fact reiterates how important prayer is to the author.

Harris explains the difference in the two words that Luke uses to describe prayer: *deesis* gives prominence to the expression of personal need while *proseuke* pertains to the element of devotion.⁵ Harris goes on to explain that the use of *deesis* is not limited to God, but can also be used of a request addressed to a man. *Proseuke*, however, is limited to God.⁶

¹ Lindell O. Harris, "Prayer in the Gospel of Luke," *SWJT* 10 (1967): 59-69.

² P. T. O'Brien, "Prayer in Luke-Acts," *TB* 24 (1973): 111-27.

³ Kyu Sam Han, "Theology of Prayer in the Gospel of Luke," *JETS* 43 (2000): 675-93.

⁴ O'Brien, "Prayer," 113.

⁵ Harris, "Prayer," 59.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Given the understanding of the importance of prayer to Luke, it is interesting to note that Luke both opens and closes his gospel with instances of prayer. In Luke 1:10, God's people are praying outside of the temple prior to the angelic announcement of the birth of John to Zechariah. The last verse of the gospel (24:53) shows a scene of Jesus' followers at the temple continually offering blessing to God.⁷

Of the prayer instances recorded in Luke's gospel, there are eight texts that relate to prayer in the life of Jesus.⁸ The majority of the other prayer texts deal with the instruction of prayer for the disciples. Only a handful of references fall outside these two distinctions: the prayers of Zechariah and Elizabeth for a son (1:13), the prayers of Anna (2:36-38), and Simeon's prayer of thanksgiving (2:26-32).

PRAYERS OF JESUS

By reading any of the gospels, especially Luke, one will easily understand that Jesus was not only a man that taught about prayer, but he was one that also practiced it. I. R. Beiler states it this way:

More compelling than anything Jesus taught about prayer by precept was what he taught by his prayer practice. he depended upon it in the great soul-moving experiences of his life . . . Whether he needed courage, strength, or fellowship with the Father, prayer was his reliance, his very mood.⁹

In many of the important ministry points of Jesus' life, Luke makes sure to record the fact that Jesus prayed. In no way was prayer an action that Jesus failed to practice. He not only taught his disciples how to pray, he demonstrated to them how to pray.

⁷ Other references to prayer in Luke's gospel include: 2:36-38; 3:21; 4:42; 5:16; 6:12; 9:18, 29; 10:21-23; 11:1-13; 18:1-14; 21:36; and 22:29-46.

⁸ 3:21; 5:16; 6:12; 9:18; 9:29; 22:32; 22:39-46; and 23:46.

⁹ Irwin Ross Beiler, *Studies in the Life of Jesus* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1936), 181.

Prayer at The Baptism of Jesus (Luke 3:21)

In this scene, after Jesus was baptized, he was praying as the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit descended. J. M. Creed notices Luke's correlation between the prayer of Jesus and the descending of the Spirit in the baptismal account. He points out that Luke uses the present participle *proseukomenou* ("praying") in contrast to the aorist *baptisthentos* ("baptized"). This indicates that Luke understands the descent of the Spirit to be coincident with the prayer of Jesus, not the baptism which had already been completed.¹⁰

Oscar Cullmann also sees a correlation with Jesus' prayer at his baptism and his prayer at the crucifixion. He argues that the true meaning of the baptism was not fully established until his death and resurrection. Because Jesus prays at his crucifixion as well, the baptism not only inaugurates his public mission, it also proleptically indicates his death and resurrection.¹¹

Routine Prayer (Luke 5:16)

Luke is the only author to record Jesus retreating to pray subsequent to the healing of the leper and just prior to his first major encounter with the scribes and Pharisees.¹² It may have been an oversight of the other authors, because of no direct correlation between this prayer and the events that preceded or succeeded. It seems, though, that Luke is offering an insight into the routine of Jesus. As Han states, Luke is noting the regularity of Jesus' prayer life.¹³

Danker does notice a correlation between Luke's explanation of Jesus' routine prayer time with the events that will follow regarding the scribes and Pharisees. He believes that Luke

¹⁰ John Martin Creed, *The Gospel According to St. Luke* (London: McMillan, 1953), 57.

¹¹ Oscar Cullmann, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Naperville, IL: Alec R. Allenson: 1950), 19.

¹² O'Brien, "Prayer," 114.

¹³ Han, "Theology," 681.

is using this instance to indicate Jesus' desire to spend time with God before he was to face any sort of opposition.¹⁴

Harris understands this verse to explain Jesus' need to "recharge" himself occasionally. He notes the constant drain of his human energy due to constant demands for his sympathy and compassion. In order for him to respond to the needs of those who flocked to him, Jesus occasionally needed to separate himself for communion with God.¹⁵

The Choosing of the Twelve (Luke 6:12)

Prior to calling his twelve disciples, Luke states that Jesus prayed all night. O'Brien suggests that Luke was illustrating Jesus' prayer over the momentous issues of the choice which Jesus was about to make.¹⁶ Han adds to this theory by stating:

The calling of disciples stresses the continuation of Jesus' work after his death. Since the entire context of Luke-Acts develops how the disciples follow Jesus' way, Jesus' prayer has to do with the life of the disciples.¹⁷

Harris goes on to state that in this instance prayer became not only Jesus submitting his petitions, but also a time for him to listen to God in an undistracted manner.¹⁸ In other words, Jesus made himself available in the times when others were sleeping so that there were no distractions in his hearing the voice of the Father.

Peter's Confession (Luke 9:18)

Jesus prays before he questions the disciples of his true identity. Luke is the only author to introduce this story with Jesus praying. Unlike Mark, Luke omits Peter's erroneous protest and Jesus' subsequent rebuke. It would seem that Luke is directing the reader away from the

¹⁴ F. W. Danker, *Jesus and New Age: A Commentary on St. Luke's Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 120.

¹⁵ Harris, "Prayer," 60-61.

¹⁶ O'Brien, "Prayer," 115.

¹⁷ Han, "Theology," 682.

¹⁸ Harris, "Prayer," 61.

negative aspect of Peter's objection, and, instead, pointing the reader towards the positive fact that Jesus' preceding prayer had been answered. Han states that Jesus' prayer had been effective because "the Father had revealed to Peter the secret of [Jesus'] messianic person and dignity."¹⁹

The Transfiguration (Luke 9:28-29)

Jesus takes his inner circle of three disciples to the mountain to pray. As he is praying, Luke records that his appearance was changed and he was joined by Moses and Elijah. Han references Jesus' routine prayer in 6:12 with this passage to indicate that this prayer time was also a part of Jesus' common routine.²⁰

It is noted that this is the only time that others were present when Jesus prayed. MacLaren offers an interesting theory about the transfiguration. He suggests that it could have been a common occurrence when Jesus entered into prayer only that no one was present to witness it, save this one time. Was it possible that, at some point, as Jesus entered into closer communion with his Father that glory shone from his face, though no one was there to record it?²¹

Intercession for Peter (Luke 22:32)

In this text, Luke states that Jesus has specifically prayed for Peter to maintain his faith. Although it has been assumed in the previous passages that Jesus has offered prayers for others, here Luke points out that Jesus definitively has offered a priestly prayer for Peter. O'Brien indicates that the plural use of "you" in this passage makes Peter a representative of the twelve,

¹⁹ Han, "Theology," 682.

²⁰ Han, "Theology," 683.

²¹ Alexander MacLaren, *The Gospel According to St. Luke* (New York: A. C. Armstrong and Son, 1909), 277.

and by extension, all believers.²² All believers have benefited from Jesus' intercessory prayer for Peter.

Prayer at Gethsemane (Luke 22:39-46)

This text shows Jesus offering prayer for himself regarding the event that will soon follow. This is the first time that Jesus has prayed a prayer of supplication for himself.²³ It is interesting, also, to note that Luke begins and ends this passage with Jesus urging the disciples to "Pray that you will not fall into temptation." Han sees a specific purpose for Luke mentioning both the prayer of Jesus and his exhortation to the disciples. In verse 39, he notes that the term Luke uses for discipleship, *akolouthēin*, is a technical term which implies participation in the fate of Jesus. Although the disciples would not share Jesus' fate immediately, Jesus' exhortation for them to pray was to prepare them for things to come while his prayer for himself was to prepare him for things to come.²⁴

Prayer on the Cross (Luke 23:34,46)

Luke is the only author to record the prayers of Jesus on the cross. The first is a prayer of forgiveness for those executing him. Harris states that Jesus "phrased in prayer the forgiveness which his death was destined to achieve for sinful men."²⁵ Even while on the cross, Jesus' thoughts and prayers were focused on those whom he came to save. The second prayer is described as a prayer of trust: "Father into your hands I commit my spirit."²⁶ It is not a prayer out of doubt or agony, rather, it is a declaration that the kingdom of God has been established by the completion of Jesus' ministry.²⁷

²² O'Brien, "Prayer," 115-116.

²³ S. John Roth, "Jesus the Pray-er," *CTM* 33 (2006): 488-500.

²⁴ Han, "Theology," 685.

²⁵ Harris, "Prayer," 64.

²⁶ Han, "Theology," 685.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

DIDACTIC PRAYER

Apart from practicing prayer in his own life, Jesus taught others both about prayer and how to pray. Luke takes notice of this and devotes much of his work to Jesus' prayer teachings. There are five main passages in which Luke discusses the teaching of prayer.²⁸ Han suggests that these five passages taken together offer a paradigm for prayer. The two parables teach one how to pray, the Lord's prayer teaches one what to pray, and in the final passage, Jesus teaches why one should pray persistently.²⁹

Prayer after the Mission of the Seventy (Luke 10:21-24)

This is one of the few instances in Luke in which he gives the reader an example of Jesus' prayer. Even though the passage is not explicitly labeled a prayer, scholars agree that it represents Jesus praying. According to Han, this section is didactic because it instructs the disciples who will engage in the harvest (referred to in 10:2) based upon the present kingdom, and it demonstrates that their prayers will bring God's harvest to completion.³⁰ In this text Luke shows that prayer is the lifestyle of those who will enter the kingdom.

The Lord's Prayer (Luke 11:2-4)

When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, he responded with what is now labeled, The Lord's Prayer. Luke's account of the prayer differs slightly from the Matthean account (Matthew 6:9-13). This prayer was given to serve as an outline for the disciples to follow.

Harris notes that Jesus instructs that prayer is directed toward God and representative of his holiness ("Father, hallowed be your name.")³¹ "Your kingdom come," was an instruction to

²⁸ 10:21-24; 11:2-4, 5-8; 18:1-18; 21:36. Luke 11:2-4, 5-8 are separated because the former is "The Lord's Prayer" and the latter is a parable on prayer.

²⁹ Han, "Theology," 687.

³⁰ Han, "Theology," 688.

³¹ Harris, "Prayer," 65.

pray that the kingdom which had already come in Jesus would be brought to fruition.³² “Give us each day our daily bread,” is a prayer of provision and constant reminding of our dependence on God.³³ “Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us,” is somewhat self-explanatory--“forgive us as we forgive others.” Although, Luke uses the term “sin” when Matthew uses the term “debts.” Harris suggests that this is because of the difference in audiences (Matthew wrote with Jews in mind while Luke wrote with Gentiles in mind.)³⁴ “Lead us not into temptation,” is a prayer for God’s providence.

Parable of the Midnight Friend (Luke 11:5-13)

Jesus uses this parable to teach on the persistence of prayer. The request of the friend is outrageous, since his midnight venture would surely wake the entire household, however, persistence is rewarded.³⁵ Just as the persistent friend would eventually receive that which he asked for, so too, will the persistent pray-er when he asks, seeks, and knocks.

Parable of the Unjust Judge (Luke 18:1-8)

This parable is another tool that Jesus uses to teach on the persistence of prayer. A widow who seeks justice against her adversary is persistent in pleading with a judge that has no concern for her. Eventually, the judge gives in to her in order for her nagging to cease. This parable is preceded by Jesus’ exhortation to always pray and never give up. Luke opens the story with this exhortation to give focus to the point of the parable: “God will hear and speedily answer the cries of his people who are persistent and faithful in prayer.”³⁶ O’Brien goes on further to suggest that Luke is addressing a situation in which Christians, under severe persecution, are denying their

³² Ibid.

³³ Leon Morris, *Luke* (TNTC 3; Leicester, England: W. B. Eerdmans, 1988), 212.

³⁴ Harris, “Prayer,” 66.

³⁵ O’Brien, “Prayer,” 118.

³⁶ Han, “Theology,” 690.

faith. Their persistence in prayer will insure that God acts speedily on their behalf.³⁷ Regardless of whether this is the case or not, the point is clear: God answers those who pray persistently.

The Watchful Prayer (Luke 21:36)

This verse is an exhortation from Jesus to always be on the watch. Again, this verse points to the idea of persistent prayer with the use of the word “always.” Morris suggests that this verse also has an eschatological perspective. “The prayer he urges involves an attitude of life, an attitude that seeks to flee worldly sins as the believer concentrates on the service of God. *To stand before the son of man* is to possess the ultimate salvation.”³⁸ The believer is to be on the watch and persistent in doing so, but this type of prayer lends itself to a lifestyle that seeks to avoid the coming age.

CONCLUSION AND MINISTRY APPLICATION

There has been much debate on which aspect of prayer in Luke is more important, the prayer life of Jesus or his teachings on prayer. It would seem, in reality, both are equally important. Jesus himself displays how important prayer is by offering his own prayer life as a model. With Jesus as the ultimate example for righteous living, how much more should believers strive to emulate him. Jesus takes it a step farther, though. Not only does he live the example of prayer, he teaches his followers both how to pray (the Lord’s prayer) and in what manner to pray (persistently). Turner sums it up when he states that “The texture of Luke’s portrait of prayer is too exotic to sum up in any epigram; for him prayer is not a technique for achieving some object or goal, it is man relating every aspect of his life . . . to God.”³⁹

³⁷ O’Brien, “Prayer,” 117-118.

³⁸ Morris, *Luke*, 329.

³⁹ M. Turner, “Prayer in the Gospels and Acts,” in *Teach Us to Pray: Prayer in the Bible and the World* (ed. D. A. Carson; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1990), 75.

Luke has more than shown the importance of prayer in the life of the believer. As seen in the Lord's prayer (Luke 11:2-4), prayer is the believer's connection to the Father. It is the means by which the believer not only asks for provision and protection ("Give us each day our daily bread . . . and lead us not into temptation."), but also a means of offering praise to the Father ("Hallowed be Your name."). In other words, prayer is direct connection with God.

Jesus himself displayed the importance of prayer by practicing it himself. It is interesting to note that before many of the major events in the life of Jesus (calling of the twelve, the transfiguration, his arrest and trial, the crucifixion, etc.) he preceded those times with prayer. There is a vital application for the believer to be drawn from this example. Significant events in the believer's life should not be experienced without prayer in the equation.

Luke has made clear that prayer is a vital aspect of the life of the believer. Jesus not only taught about prayer, he also provided the example and set the standard. The believer should emulate Jesus in any way possible.

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