**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**LUKE-043**. **THE PRAYING CHRIST by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"... As He was praying in a certain place, when He ceased, one of His disclples said unto Him, Lord, teach us to pray."*

*Luke 11:1*

It is noteworthy that we owe our knowledge of the prayers of Jesus principally to the Evangelist Luke. There is, indeed, one solemn hour of supplication under the quivering shadows of the olive-trees in Gethsemane which is recorded by Matthew and Mark as well; and though the fourth Gospel passes over that agony of prayer, it gives us, in accordance with its ruling purpose, the great chapter that records His priestly intercession. But in addition to these instances the first Gospel furnishes but one, and the second but two, references to the subject. All the others are found in Luke.

I need not stay to point out how this fact tallies with the many other characteristics of the third Gospel, which mark it as eminently the story of the Son of Man. The record which traces our Lord's descent to Adam rather than to Abraham; which tells the story of His birth, and gives us all we know of the child Jesus; which records His growth in wisdom and stature, and has preserved a multitude of minute points bearing on His true manhood, as well as on the tenderness of His sympathy and the universality of His work, most naturally emphasises that most precious indication of His humanity--His habitual prayerfulness. The Gospel of the King, which is the first Gospel, or of the Servant, which is the second, or of the Son of God, which is the fourth, had less occasion to dwell on this. Royalty, practical Obedience, Divinity, are their respective themes. Manhood is Luke's, and he is ever pointing us to the kneeling Christ.

Consider, then, for a moment, how precious the prayers of Jesus are, as bringing Him very near to us in His true manhood. There are deep and mysterious truths involved with which we do not meddle now. But there are also plain and surface truths which are very helpful and blessed. We thank God for the story of His weariness when He sat on the well, and of His slumber when, worn out with a hard day's work, He slept on the hard wooden pillow in the stern of the fishing-boat among the nets and the litter. It brings Him near to us when we read that He thirsted, and nearer still when the immortal words fall on our wondering ears, Jesus wept. But even more precious than these indications of His true participation in physical needs and human emotion, is the great evidence of His prayers, that He too lived a life of dependence, of communion, and of submission; that in our religious life, as in all our life, He is our pattern and forerunner. As the Epistle to the Hebrews puts it, He shows that He is not ashamed to call us brethren by this, that He too avows that He lives by faith; and by His life--and surely pre-eminently by His prayers--declares, I will put my trust in Him. We cannot think of Christ too often or too absolutely as the object of faith; and as the hearer of our cries; but we may, and some of us do, think of Him too seldom as the pattern of faith, and as the example for our devotion. We should feel Him a great deal nearer us; and the fact of His manhood would not only be grasped more clearly by orthodox believers, but would be felt in more of its true tenderness, if we gave more prominence in our thoughts to that picture of the praying Christ.

Another point that may be suggested is, that the highest, holiest life needs specific acts and times of prayer. A certain fantastical and overstrained spirituality is not rare, which professes to have got beyond the need of such beggarly elements. Some tinge of this colours the habits of many people who are scarcely conscious of its presence, and makes them somewhat careless as to forms and times of public or of that of private worship. I do not think that I am wrong in saying that there is a growing laxity in that matter among people who are really trying to live Christian lives. We may well take the lesson which Christ's prayers teach us, for we all need it, that no life is so high, so holy, so full of habitual communion with God, that it can afford to do without the hour of prayer, the secret place, the uttered word. If we are to pray without ceasing, by the constant attitude of communion and the constant conversion of work into worship, we must certainly have, and we shall undoubtedly desire, special moments when the daily sacrifice of doing good passes into the sacrifice of our lips. The devotion which is to be diffused through our lives must be first concentrated and evolved in our prayers. These are the gathering-grounds which feed the river. The life that was all one long prayer needed the mountain-top and the nightly converse with God. He who could say, The Father hath not left Me alone, for I do always the things that please Him, felt that He must also have the special communion of spoken prayer. What Christ needed we cannot afford to neglect.

Thus Christ's own prayers do, in a very real sense, teach us to pray. But it strikes me that, if we will take the instances in which we find Him praying, and try to classify them in a rough way, we may gain some hints worth laying to heart. Let me attempt this briefly now.

**I. First, then, the praying Christ teaches us to pray as a rest after service.**

The Evangelist Mark gives us, in his brief, vivid way, a wonderful picture in his first chapter of Christ's first Sabbath-day of ministry in Capernaum. It was crowded with work. The narrative goes hurrying on through the busy hours, marking the press of rapidly succeeding calls by its constant reiteration--straightway, immediately, forthwith, anon, immediately. He teaches in the synagogue; without breath or pause He heals a man with an unclean spirit; then at once passes to Simon's house, and as soon as He enters has to listen to the story of how the wife's mother lay sick of a fever. They might have let Him rest for a moment, but they are too eager, and He is too pitying, for delay. As soon as He hears, He helps. As soon as He bids it, the fever departs. As soon as she is healed, the woman is serving them. There can have been but a short snatch of such rest as such a house could afford. Then when the shadows of the western hills began to fall upon the blue waters of the lake, and the sunset ended the restrictions of the Sabbath, He is besieged by a crowd full of sorrow and sickness, and all about the door they lie, waiting for its opening. He could not keep it shut any more than His heart or His hand, and so all through the short twilight, and deep into the night, He toils amongst the dim, prostrate forms. What a day it had been of hard toil, as well as of exhausting sympathy! And what was His refreshment? An hour or two of slumber; and then, in the morning, rising up a great while before day, He went out, and departed into a solitary place, and there prayed (Mark 1:35).

In the same way we find Him seeking the same repose after another period of much exertion and strain on body and mind. He had withdrawn Himself and His disciples from the bustle which Mark describes so graphically. There were many coming and going, and they had no leisure, so much as to eat. So, seeking quiet, He takes them across the lake into the solitudes on the other side. But the crowds from all the villages near its head catch sight of the boat in crossing, and hurry round; and there they all are at the landing-place, eager and exacting as ever. He throws aside the purpose of rest, and all day long, wearied as He was, taught them many things. The closing day brings no respite. He thinks of their hunger, before His own fatigue, and will not send them away fasting. So He ends that day of labour by the miracle of feeding the five thousand. The crowds gone to their homes, He can at last think of Himself; and what is His rest? He loses not a moment in constrainingHis disciples to go away to the other side, as if in haste to remove the last hindrance to something that He had been longing to get to. And when He had sent them away, He departed into a mountain to pray (Mark 6:46; Matt. 14:23).

That was Christ's refreshment after His toil. So He blended contemplation and service, the life of inward communion and the life of practical obedience. How much more do we need to interpose the soothing and invigorating influences of quiet communion between the acts of external work, since our work may harm us, as His never did Him. It may disturb and dissipate our communion with God; it may weaken the very motive from which it should arise; it may withdraw our gaze from God and fix it upon ourselves. It may puff us up with the conceit of our own powers; it may fret us with the annoyances of resistance; it may depress us with the consciousness of failure; and in a hundred other ways may waste and wear away our personal religion. The more we work the more we need to pray. In this day of activity there is great danger, not of doing too much, but of praying too little for so much work. These two--work and prayer, action and contemplation--are twin-sisters. Each pines without the other. We are ever tempted to cultivate one or the other disproportionately. Let us imitate Him who sought the mountain-top as His refreshment after toil, but never left duties undone or sufferers unrelieved in pain. Let us imitate Him who turned from the joys of contemplation to the joys of service without a murmur, when His disciples broke in on His solitude with, all men seek Thee, but never suffered the outward work to blunt His desire for, nor to encroach on the hour of, still communion with His Father. Lord, teach us to work; Lord, teach us to pray.

**II. The praying Christ teaches us to pray as a preparation for important steps.**

Whilst more than one Gospel tells us of the calling of the Apostolic Twelve, the Gospel of the manhood alone narrates (Luke 6:12) that on the eve of that great epoch in the development of Christ's kingdom, He went out into a mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God. Then, when it was day, He calls to Him His disciples, and chooses the Twelve.

A similar instance occurs, at a later period, before another great epoch in His course. The great confession made by Peter, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God, was drawn forth by our Lord to serve as basis for His bestowment on the Apostles of large spiritual powers, and for the teaching, with much increased detail and clearness, of His approaching sufferings. In both aspects it distinctly marks a new stage. Concerning it, too, we read, and again in Luke alone (ix. 18), that it was preceded by solitary prayer.

Thus He teaches us where and how we may get the clear insight into circumstances and men that may guide us aright. Bring your plans, your purposes to God's throne. Test them by praying about them. Do nothing large or new--nothing small or old either, for that matter--till you have asked there, in the silence of the secret place, Lord, what wouldest Thou have me to do?There is nothing bitterer to parents than when children begin to take their own way without consulting them. Do you take counsel of your Father, and have no secrets from Him. It will save you from many a blunder and many a heartache; it will make your judgment clear, and your step assured, even in new and difficult ways, if you will learn from the praying Christ to pray before you plan, and take counsel of God before you act.

**III. Again, the praying Christ teaches us to pray as the condition of receiving the Spirit and the brightness of God.**

There were two occasions in the life of Christ when visible signs showed His full possession of the Divine Spirit, and the lustre of His glorious nature. There are large and perplexing questions connected with both, on which I have no need to enter. At His baptism the Spirit of God descended visibly and abode on Jesus. At His transfiguration His face shone as the light, and His garments were radiant as sunlit snow. Now on both these occasions our Gospel, and our Gospel alone, tells us that it was whilst Christ was in the act of prayer that the sign was given: Jesus being baptized, and praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Ghost descended(iii. 21, 22). As He prayed, the fashion of His countenance was altered, and His raiment was white and glistening(ix. 29).

Whatever difficulty may surround the first of these narratives especially, one thing is clear, that in both of them there was a true communication from the Father to the man Jesus. And another thing is, I think, clear too, that our Evangelist meant to lay stress on the preceding act as the human condition of such communication. So if we would have the heavens opened over our heads, and the dove of God descending to fold its white wings, and brood over the chaos of our hearts till order and light come there, we must do what the Son of Man did--pray. And if we would have the fashion of our countenances altered, the wrinkles of care wiped out, the traces of tears dried up, the blotches of unclean living healed, and all the brands of worldliness and evil exchanged for the name of God written on our foreheads, and the reflected glory irradiating our faces, we must do as Christ did--pray. So, and only so, will God's Spirit fill our hearts, God's brightness flash in our faces, and the vesture of heaven clothe our nakedness.

**IV. Again, the praying Christ teaches us to pray as the preparation for sorrow.**

Here all the three Evangelists tell us the same sweet and solemn story. It is not for us to penetrate further than they carry us into the sanctities of Gethsemane. Jesus, though hungering for companionship in that awful hour, would take no man with Him there; and He still says, Tarry ye here, while I go and pray yonder. But as we stand afar off, we catch the voice of pleading rising through the stillness of the night, and the solemn words tell us of a Son's confidence, of a man's shrinking, of a Saviour's submission. The very spirit of all prayer is in these broken words. That was truly The Lord's Prayerwhich He poured out beneath the olives in the moonlight. It was heard when strength came from heaven, which He used in praying more earnestly. It was heard when, the agony past and all the conflict ended in victory, He came forth, with that strange calm and dignity, to give Himself first to His captors and then to His executioners, the ransom for the many.

As we look upon that agony and these tearful prayers, let us not only look with thankfulness, but let that kneeling Saviour teach us that in prayer alone can we be forearmed against our lesser sorrows; that strength to bear flows into the heart that is opened in supplication; and that a sorrow which we are made able to endure is more truly conquered than a sorrow which we avoid. We have all a cross to carry and a wreath of thorns to wear. If we want to be fit for our Calvary--may we use that solemn name?--we must go to our Gethsemane first.

So the Christ who prayed on earth teaches us to pray; and the Christ who intercedes in heaven helps us to pray, and presents our poor cries, acceptable through His sacrifice, and fragrant with the incense from His own golden censer.

O Thou by whom we come to God,

The Life, the Truth, the Way;

The path of prayer Thyself hast trod;

Lord! teach us how to pray.