**THINGS THAT MATTER MOST - DEVOTIONAL PAPERS BY JOHN H. JOWETT**

**05. CHRIST'S HABIT OF PRAYER by JOHN H. JOWETT**

I WANT to consider Christ's habit of private prayer. In the first place, it is very significant that He prayed at all. Jesus of Nazareth had every form of strength which men associate with masculine life. He had strength of body. He had strength of mind. He had strength of purpose and will. He had marvellous strength of affection. He had strength to move amid foul conditions without catching their contagion. He had extraordinary strength of patience. He was absolutely fearless in the presence of hostility. He was calm and undaunted when assailed by official religion. He had every form of strength which men count admirable. And this man prayed. He was constantly praying, and He was the strongest who ever trod the ways of men. I want to consider two or three occasions in His earthly life when we find Him at prayer.

First of all, then, I find Him in prayer when temptation drew near. I am not now thinking of that early experience in His life which is known to us as the Temptation. I turn from that desert experience to another which came to Him in the thick of His ministry, after the purpose of His redemptive ministry had been revealed. I choose the hour which preceded the Transfiguration. Nothing is said about the tempter; but unless I utterly misread the incident, and misinterpret the secrets of common life, the temptation was fierce and acute. The Lord had manifested His love. He had declared His gracious purpose. He had sealed His testimony with His deeds. Already He was shedding His blood in sacrificial service. And with what results? The horizon was blackening with omens of rejection. The storm of hostility was brewing. The air was thick with suspicion, derision, and contempt. Unfriendly eyes glared upon Him from every side. "He came unto His own, and His own received Him not." And just then, when the elements were gathering for tempests, I read these words: "He went up into a mountain to pray." And why did He go? Before Him there stretched the darkening road to appalling desolation. Yonder loomed the cross. And this was the temptation which, I think, approached His soul: "Is it worth while?" Should He go on to night and crucifixion, or there and then finish with translation? Reverently I believe these were the alternatives in those days of gathering gloom. Should He choose an immediate re-entry into "the glory which I had with Thee before the world was," or a re-entry into the world of resentment where dwelt the evil spirits of malice and rejection? Should He finish there or go on to the bitter end? "He prayed," and while He prayed He made His choice. He would go down to the scene of rejection, down to the waiting multitude, down to the envious eyes, down to the malicious designs, down to the cross.

"And as He prayed the fashion of His countenance was altered." And no wonder! We are always transfigured when we make choice of the Divine will. There came a voice to Him saying, "This is My beloved Son." "And they came down from the mountain, and much people met Him."

Have we not known a similar hour, as far as our own limitations would permit? Have we never been tempted to ask if a certain bit of blood-demanding work was worth while? Have we not had pointed out to us the flippancy of those we tried to help, their indifference, their levity, their contempt, and have we not felt the enticement to lay the task down? There is that bit of work we have tried to do on the City Council. We have laboured for years. We have been exposed to the insults of contested elections. And there is our quiet home, with the wife and children, and the slippers and the books. Shall we choose the abode of comfort, or return again to difficult service? Shall we put on our slippers or stride out again on the heavy, thorny road? Just at seasons like these and at that juncture Jesus prayed, and while He was on His knees He made His choice.

Let us look at the Master again in the habit of prayer. "And He healed many that were sick of divers diseases, and cast out many devils ... and He departed into a solitary place and there prayed." But what need was there to pray just then? He was most evidently engaged in doing good. The newly-opened eyes of the blind were radiant with thanksgiving. The once lame man leaped as a hart. The Master abounded in good works, and some measure of popular favour rested upon Him. Then why go apart to pray?

First of all, He retired to pray in order to provide against nervous exhaustion. All this healing, all this giving, all this sympathy meant large expenditure of vital power. "Virtue is gone out of Me." And, therefore, He prayed in order that His vital resources might be restored. There is some work that cannot be done without resort to Divine communion. When the soul is drained in the ministry of sympathy, there is nothing for it but resort to the springs, and there is nothing which so readily and powerfully restores a man like drinking the water of life. "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength."

But there is a second reason why our Saviour prayed when He was in the midst of successful public work. He prayed in order to make His soul secure against the perils of success, against "the destruction that wasteth at noonday." Success may bruise the spirit more than failure. Heat can ruin a violin quite as effectually as the chilly damp. Prosperity slays many a man whose health was preserved in adversity. Robert Burns was never the same after the glamour of Edinburgh. And so I think our Lord prayed in the hour of popular favour lest His very success should maim His life of service. And there is significant counsel in His practice for all the children of men. When we are busily successful, let us pray, and we need not "be afraid for the arrow that flieth by day."

There is one other occasion in our Master's life of prayer to which I want to lead the thoughts of my readers. "Now 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." There was a night of prayer, and then there was a great decision. Our Lord took time to pray before He made a momentous choice. We in our own degree have similar choices to make, both in our individual and corporate life. We have to choose our careers. We have to make choice of turnings in the ever-winding way. We have to choose our representatives in the City Council and in Parliament. We have to choose ministers and deacons, and in a hundred other ways serious decisions have to be made. Why should we pray? We must, first of all, pray in order that big considerations might possess the mind. We are prone to live amid small motives, tiny purposes, belittling prejudices, partial and lop-sided ambitions. And there is nothing kills little things like our prayers. If we take our politics into the realm of prayer, it is impossible for us to remain wretched partisans. We may give a party vote, but our vision will reach beyond the bounds of party, and through a party triumph we shall seek the extension of the kingdom of God. When we pray we move into the realm of big things, big motives, big sympathies, big ideals. The biggest outlooks come to us when we are on our knees. And so, when we are making big decisions, let us find time to pray, in order that the matters may be greatly decided, and that all little and belittling intrusions may be effectually destroyed.

And so, if we are truly wise, we shall surely pray. To cease to pray is to build up the windows of the soul, to close the ventilators, to shut out air and light, to immure the soul in an atmosphere devoid of inspiration. And yet it is possible so to pray that the spirit of prayer shall determine all our purposes, and all our purposes shall be fit to steal into our prayers. A friend said of Dr. Westcott that "he read and worked in the very mind in which he prayed, and his prayer was of singular intensity." That is a great and gracious attainment, and I think we can all share the wonderful triumph which mingles prayerful aspiration with common toil.