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CHRIST AS A MAN OF PRAYER.

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"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."
—LUKE 6:12.

ALMOST every thoughtful person has known moods in which the solitude and silence of nature came like balm upon the hurt soul. It was refreshing and comforting to get away from contact with man, from vices that disgust us, and pettiness that vexes us, and deceit that affronts us, into contact with the calm, sweet refreshings of nature and communion with God. So we may suppose our Lord, only in an immeasurably purer spirit, to have betaken himself gladly from the unbelief and the hardness, from the mercenary spirit of the loaves and fishes and the hateful Pharisaic pride, from the misery and the degradation, into this mountain-top far from all sights or sounds of man. "The scene of this lonely vigil is the same, in all probability, as that of the Sermon on the Mount." As described by recent observers, "it is a

hill with a summit which closely resembles an Oriental saddle with its two high peaks. On the west it rises very little above the level of a broad and undulating plain; on the east it sinks precipitately toward a plateau, on which lies, immediately beneath the cliffs, the village of Hattin; and from this plateau the traveler descends through a wild and tropic gorge to the shining levels of the Lake of Galilee. It is the only conspicuous hill on the western side of the lake, and it is singularly adapted by its conformation both to form a place for short retirement and a rendezvous for gathering multitudes." Hither at nightfall, alone, weary, burdened with a world's redemption, came Christ to pray. The stars came out one by one above him, the silence deepened around him as the night wore on, and when, after midnight had passed and the morning star stood in the heavens, the first ray of dawn tipped the trans-Jordanic hills, Christ was still in this communion with his Father. It is not, then, so much Christ fleeing from the harassing, disappointing, mournful contact with men and men's sins and miseries into the vernal quiet and refreshing beauty of nature, as it is Christ in this night of prayer on a mountain-top disclosing to man prayer in the highest ranges of spiritual experience, which arrests us and challenges an eager and a solemn

attention. *Christ's devotional habits or Christ as a man of prayer* gives us our theme.

In the outset, and before any attempt is made to combine in one picture the scattered notices of his prayers, it should be noted that there is something wonderfully attractive and powerfully suggestive in this view of Christ. It contrasts so mightily with that of the same Christ stilling tempests, casting out evil spirits, raising the dead. And this not only as it reverses Christ's position, bringing him to his knees or on his face as a supplicant for help, whereas winds and seas and devils and the very dead had but just obeyed his voice, but still more as it shows him entered into our deepest and most sacred human experiences, those of communion with God in prayer, in sore soul-struggles, in solitary, anxious, possibly bitter experiences. To gain any fit impression of how deeply and pervasively prayer entered into the human life of Christ, we must study the four Gospels and put together their separate notices of his devotional life. Over the life of Jesus preparatory to his public ministry, that thirty years at Nazareth, for the most part a thick veil hangs. But this we *do* know, that he was trained in the Old Testament Scriptures, and the spirit of the Old Testament Scriptures is the spirit of prayer all the way through, from Jacob's

wrestling with the Angel to Daniel's supplications toward Jerusalem. How natural, then, to find, as we do find, that his public ministry began, as it ended, in prayer. "Now when all the people were baptized, it came to pass, that Jesus also being baptized, and *praying*, the heaven was opened." That opened heaven was the avenue through which his supplications found their way to God his Father till death closed his lips in silence. The Evangelists are not effusive and declamatory on this theme. They even treat it with a sacred reserve, seldom lifting the veil from the sacred privacy. But whenever it is lifted, what we see rivets the impression that prayerfulness comes into the life of Jesus in no secondary nor incidental way, but as its undertone, its substrata on which his public life and ministry repose. The Evangelists have singled out instances of Christ's devotions, his prayers at the remarkable junctures of his history—when he was baptized, when he was transfigured, when he chose the twelve apostles, when one of them was to be sifted like wheat, when he was to be separated from his disciples, when his soul was coming under its great agony, and when he bowed his head to death. The impression which such records make on us is that these prayers are the indexes to his whole life as a life of prayerfulness. They suggest

to us the fact that he made so much of prayer as to avail himself of every possible outward aid to devotion. He who was careful to instruct men that they were to enter into their closet and shut to the door and pray to God in secret—he sought the stillness of night-seasons and mountain-tops, the calming influences of perfect solitude far from the madding crowd. These notices disclose to us the fact that Christ's devotional life here and there came out in transcendent intensity and volume, taking for its needed expression whole nights upon mountain-tops. Pause a moment and think of Christ's praying through that night, from watch to watch, till the breaking day called him to labor. We know not for what he prayed, we know not what blessedness of heavenly communion or what agonies of wrestling supplication the still heavens above him witnessed; whether Gethsemane were foreshadowed or Hermon renewed. If, however, we notice carefully the fact that in all such records prayer holds a prominent place in what may be called the *emergencies* of Christ's history, we cannot fail to be impressed by such prayers as revelations of Christ's devotional life. For being made in all things like unto his brethren, there came to him, as there come to all of us, critical periods in life, when existence suddenly takes on deeper responsi-

bilities. It is some grave question to affect the whole future of life for us—a change which will surely project its influences into eternity for ourselves and for those dear to us. It is the memorable thing in the history of the Redeemer that he entered on no such period without prayer. Look again at that night of prayer on the mountain-top. Consider to what it is the prelude. The time has come for the Saviour to associate with himself the men who were to be the founders of his Church on earth. The whole future of that Church is to be affected by the transaction. It is the question of Peter and James and John. His selection is made after the night of prayer, and they go out to their mighty responsible work under the canopy of a Redeemer's night-long supplication to God. In the course of his ministry another and very different experience rises before him. For some purpose, not directly revealed—perhaps to strengthen the faith of his disciples in himself by disclosing to them some of his essential glories; perhaps to strengthen his own heart by some transcendent communion with the heavenly world—for some great purpose he is to be transfigured before the disciples and before the wondering, adoring ages. But he passes under the great change through the gates of prayer. *“As he prayed, the fashion of his counte-*

nance was altered." Drawing near the close of his ministry, when the hour and the meaning of his great sacrifice press themselves upon his soul with so marvelous distinctness and poignancy, he exclaims, "Now is my soul troubled, and what shall I say?" And he answers his own question by a prayer to his Father in heaven.

At last the ministry is drawing to its close. The last supper is celebrated; the last discourses are uttered. His teaching mounts to its sublimest reach and stretches to its utmost range. As he began his public ministry by prayer so must it be closed in prayer; and thus was breathed forth the last, the intercessory prayer of Christ, which rises into a grandeur of supplication so subdued, so tender, that it is the very holy of holies of inspiration. These all were emergencies of labor, emergencies of suffering. How fruitful in every age have they not been in evoking from human lips plaintive, passionate cries to Heaven. We look into the shades of Gethsemane, and see stretched out in dim outline beneath the olive trees the prostrate Son of God. We hear a prayer; it struggles up into utterance, every word palpitating with a great anguish. Thrice—thrice it smites our ears and pierces the heavens: "Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me." The cup did not pass, but

an angel came. And then, oh then, in the supreme moment, when the sacrifice was complete and redemption was finished, once more Christ prayed, "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit," and his life went out in the breathing of a prayer. Olivet, Hermon, Gethsemane, Calvary—what views they give us of the praying Christ! These emergencies of his history fall, as you perceive, into two classes. They are emergencies of labor or suffering. Either he has some vaster responsibilities to meet, or his soul is to pass under the baptism of some great anguish, and in both he needs to pray, in both does pray, and teaches us how to pray in both. In just those periods, at just those points of his life when sacred destinies are most densely gathered, those passages in his history on which, therefore, the gaze of men would be most intensely fixed, there we find him praying. So do Christ's prayers lie at the very heart of his ministry. His devotional habits were marked by the two great traits of intensity and perseverance. He who taught that men ought always to pray and not to faint, rose up a great while before day and departed into a solitary place, and there prayed, or spent a night of solitude in supplication. Prayer was no occasional, sporadic element in Christ's life. The fountain leaping far into the air shows the deeply

hidden spring; and so prayer comes to the forefront in the life of Christ. Side by side with teachings, with deeds, with sufferings which proclaim him the God incarnate, the man divine, Christ's prayers show what celestial forces played through that life, finding it so perfectly human in its experiences of want, and making it so perfectly divine in its blessedness of supply. Still we must advance one step farther and see how Christ's prayerfulness was balanced by Christ's laboriousness.

It has not always been the case that so-called men of prayer have been men of Christian toil. Much, indeed, of so-called communion with God seems to be an end in itself, looking to enjoyment or to a sort of spiritual development, which is pietism, but not piety. The mystics of the Middle Ages, like John Tauler, some more modern mystics, like Madame Guyon, approached dangerously near such an error, if they did not topple over its verge. There is an ignorant piety full of emotionalism, which is fluent in prayer, works itself up into a sort of ecstasy, but which has apparently no moral basis. But without going at length into these fearful distortions of true prayerfulness, which shock and disgust all right-minded people, skeptics and intelligent believers alike, we may find some food for thought in the great disparity for

many of us between the amount of our praying and the amount of our working. How often we have prayed with undoubted fervor and sincerity for the kingdom of God! If by an effort of memory we could recall the numbers of such prayers *we* have offered, and if by any disclosure we could see the numbers of prayers the saints of all ages have offered, and could compare them with the actual labors put forth, manifold as these have been, we should be overwhelmed with the enormous disparity between praying and working. It is so easy to pray, and so hard to work—that is, it is so easy to go through the motions or forms of prayer; but to work—there comes the test of courage, endurance, faith. To say, “Thy kingdom come,” and to feel that it would be so blessed and so glorious if it only would come, this is surely no thorny path to tread. But to translate the prayer into action, to do the deed on which the coming kingdom depends, “ay, there’s the rub.”

The moment, however, we look at prayer as it stands in the life of any saint of God, Old Testament or New, that moment we see no such disparity existing. Every man of prayer is a man of toil too. Elijah prayed, and the heavens gave no rain. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave forth the rain abundantly. He was a man of like passions

as we are. But look at that stern, mighty old prophet, majestic figure that he is, of uncompromising fidelity in a time of apostasy, and see how in him mighty labors kept even pace with mighty prayers. The same thing is true of Paul. His simple but appealing words show us the man, whose very conversion was heralded by the words, "Behold, he prayeth." "*Night and day praying exceedingly for you.*" But all this life of devotion, how it rises against a mighty background of toil and suffering for his Lord.

In Christ, however, most conspicuously are the two elements joined—the praying and the working. Paint his devotional life in never so vivid colors, his working life keeps in harmony with every tint and outline. In fact, what gives this picture in the text—Christ praying alone on the mountain-top through the long night-watches—its great power and glory is that he went to that mountain-top after one day of toil, and would come down from it to engage in another exactly like it; so that if a disciple could say of his unrecorded works, the world itself could not contain the books that might be written to record them, it might also be said that those works of Jesus, so incessant, so numberless, so gracious, are only the outgrowth of an answering prayerfulness. Nor can we duly estimate the

prayerfulness of Christ till we look at his prayers as intercessory prayers.

The intercession of Christ is one divine function of his priestly office. He is now fulfilling it, at the right hand of God. One design certainly of the Epistle to the Hebrews is to acquaint us with the nature and the blessedness of the sacerdotal ministry now exercised by Christ in behalf of his people. It must differ from his atoning work. That is finished—complete. It must rest upon and depend on the atoning work, for that is urged as the ground of his intercession. Whatever it is in nature or manifestation, it fills heaven with praise and earth with blessing. Now, of this heavenly intercession some of his earthly supplications are beautiful types. Indeed, in one sense, as his whole life was vicarious, so all his praying is vicarious. If it was in form prayer a blessing to himself, it is in fact prayer that he might thereby bless the world he came to redeem. But his prayers often assumed directly the intercessory form and style. As such, they interpret to us what are the heavenly intercessions within the veil still offered for his people. Young children were brought to him that he should put his hands upon them and *pray*. “And he took them up in his arms, put his hands upon them, and blessed them.” Christ praying for

a group of children—does this seem to any mind a lowly office for him to assume? If so, it is only because the question of childhood is feebly conceived and its immense range overlooked, or because the blessed truth is unappreciated that the very greatness of divine love is often manifest in the feebleness and helplessness of the objects toward which it is exercised. When, a generation since, a gifted Christian poetess wrote her “Cry of the Children,” the Christian world was roused by her pathetic, indignant song. What was it, after all, but a faint echo from a Christian woman’s soul of what ages before had been heard in Palestine, when Christ made *his* prayer for childhood?

Still more specifically and powerfully does Christ commend to our hearts the intercessory type of prayer in his words to the apostle Peter: “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.” Christ knew this disciple stood in imminent peril; that his soul would shortly be shaken in gusts of temptation, “as when one thresheth wheat upon the threshing floor and winnoweth it.” The story of Simon Peter’s denial of his Lord is the actual commentary on this word of the Lord. What kept him safe in that terrible hour from final, utter

apostasy? What saved him from a shipwreck of faith, hopeless, irretrievable, disastrous? That intercession of Christ—that, and that alone. “I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not.” There was evidently an hour when Jesus bore in prayer to his Father the case of this imperiled disciple, when Christ pleaded for him at the throne of grace, and forever illustrated for all men and all time the great doctrine of intercession. It is only, however, when we turn to Christ’s last or intercessory prayer, recorded in the seventeenth chapter of St. John’s Gospel, that we can grasp any fit conception of what Christ’s earthly intercessions were for fullness and richness. What vastness of range, as it covers the whole body of the faithful, that great multitude which no man can number, gathered from the east and the west, the north and the south, and who stood to Christ as all those who had been given him! What ages of Christian toil and Christian conflict, suffering and testimony, self-sacrifice and aspiration, it covers, as the one body of Christian discipleship is brought under the terms of this prayer! What richness, what amplitude of petition, as it stretches away from sanctification on earth to glorification in heaven, from holy ward against the evil that is in the world, to participation and so perception of the glory which Christ

has and had before the foundation of the world. As his miracles are the fit symbols of his power, so this intercessory prayer is the fit symbol of his intercessions in heaven, interpreting and endearing them to our human hearts as we slowly and painfully struggle upward along the path of Christian discipline, sorrow, and toil.

And thus, indeed, are we brought to see the fact that Christ, in these prayers of an earthly intercession, reveals to us the moral grandeur as well as preciousness there is in prayer. If a man could only pray for himself, if by some limitation in the nature of things, or in the immutable sovereignty of God, every soul had the privilege for itself alone, even then such a boon offered to all were a priceless blessing. But now, as intercession for others, how prayer rises and swells into moral grandeur and moral worth! Jesus, standing with his disciples about the table on which the sacrament of the last supper was yet to be celebrated, and as they were about to start for the garden across the brook Kedron, lifts his eyes to heaven. But he has already looked down through the ages, far across continents then unknown, and sees the fast gathering throng of his disciples; sees them toiling, witnessing, suffering for his sake; sees the faithful leaders in one generation die, and those of the next

run to take their places; sees all the dreadful corruptions, all the stern conflicts, all the sad heresies and schisms, all the triumphs too, and growths, as the blessed leaven slowly leavens the whole lump; and as he looks on the whole up to the very end, he prays for all those who should believe on him through the word of his apostles. And from this scene on earth we look reverently up to his throne in heaven, where he ever liveth to make intercession for us.

This study of Christ's devotional habits leads straight to several lessons touching on vital spiritual interests. First, as to the individual, we can see how large a place prayer ought to hold in every human life. Did Jesus Christ find such need of prayer? Was he in his sinless manhood so beset by duties and pressed by responsibilities and sorrows that *he* had need of this strong crying and tears? We may be sure that he who was the Truth prayed because prayer met, and prayer only could meet, actual, living, daily wants. But if this is true for Christ, how much more for men, who are sinful and weak and ignorant. What an awful vacuum is a prayerless life! There is not a soul before me, not one, but is so encompassed with infirmities, and yet has so much of Christian responsibility in one shape or other to meet; but is so poorly equipped

for service of Christ, compared with what he should be as a servant of the Lord; but has so many and so pressing spiritual wants, that if such a life be prayerless, it is a moral anomaly baffling all explanation, save that which comes in an unbelieving and hardened heart. In fact, it is the privilege of man to pray, because we have a Mediator with God—Christ Jesus. Prayer, then, in human life, by reason of its needs so manifold and pressing, by reason of its perils so various and so imminent, by reason of its opportunities so gracious and so fleeting—prayer ought to come to the front in every man's life as a spiritual power, a power with God. Thus it stands in the life of Christ. Thus he has put it for all men by his own divine example. Effectual and fervent praying may sound depths, as it may test qualities of manhood, which working never can.

Secondly, as to the body of Christian discipleship. For as an agency in promoting the kingdom of God on earth, prayer is to be put, not side by side with the preaching of the Word and ordinances, but above them. They are nothing except a divine influence vitalizes them, and that divine influence the power of the Spirit of God, that comes only along the channels opened by prayer. So Christ, in the model of all prayer, taught his disciples to say, "Thy kingdom come."

Prayer as an agency for promoting the kingdom of God is prayer in its form of intercession. It has all the moral grandeur and all the divine tenderness which are reflected from Christ's prayer for the believers of all ages. And the danger which now more than any other threatens us is that we shall be found looking away from the sole efficacious element in spiritual growth, the might of God's Spirit, to what is adventitious, subordinate—to the mere instrument, to the "drawing element" in the pulpit, to the "live element" in the prayer-meeting, to the blackboard element in the Sunday-school, to the thousand and one expedients devised for making religion interesting; whereas, if we did but remember it, one breath of God's spirit on a human soul, one touch of that Spirit on the long-sealed spiritual vision, and the whole soul is alert and absorbed by the great spiritual interests, by truth, by the means of grace. No need now for the spicery of religious entertainments. The soul has come to find in the sober, earnest following of Christ what expands all its powers and meets all its wants. While this age, as all ages past, can forget the ancient warning, "*Cursed is the man that maketh an arm of flesh his trust,*" only at deadly peril and unutterable loss, there is this difference between Christ's

praying and our own. He always prayed aright; we ask amiss. And we enter into the secret of Christ's praying only as we pray to our heavenly Father above all fear of violating natural laws, and in the perfect confidence that God can answer any wise prayer, and have the whole system of laws move majestically forward, untroubled as the slumber of an infant. "Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my Father, and he shall presently give me twelve legions of angels?" This was the faith of Jesus in prayer, that by the opening of his lips in a supplication he could fill the sky above him with twelve legions of angels, hovering above his head, a canopy of defense from all harm, and filling the air with their shining squadrons. This should be our faith in prayer, that it will bring into our lives and into the lives of others, unnumbered and matchless blessings which will never come unless our lips open to pray. Cure your doubts about prayer by looking to Jesus. Philosophy will not cure them, but the example of a praying Christ may and can cure your weakness of faith in prayer by recalling the sincerity and strength of Christ's confidence in it, and its manifest answers in his history. Come into his theory of prayer, and it shall cease to wear any tentative, experimental look. It shall be a power with God.

Rebuke all your bad habits as to prayer, all your indolence in and suppression of prayer, by this study of the devotional habits of Christ, not as an abstraction in theological science, but as a lifelike thing in the history of Jesus. Put no more excuses before God for your meagerness in prayer because of your distracted life. Learn from Jesus how to bring the calming influences of prayer into the distractions of your business. Seek, as he sought, every outward aid to prayer: stillness of night-seasons, freshness of morning dawn, solitude of sequestered places. Then shall prayer in your life rise to the majesty and worth of its office—as communion with Heaven.