
With Christ in the School of Prayer

(3) **The Prayer That Changes Everything**

Psalm 32; Matthew 26:36-46

“Thy will be done.”

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In the first two messages on the Lord’s Prayer, we have been giving attention to Jesus’ prayer life as a model for ours. We have been talking about Jesus’ habit of prayer; it seemed he needed to fellowship with his heavenly Father, to be reconnected to the Source of His wisdom, love, and power. Almost like plugging a lamp into the source of electricity, Jesus needed to “plug in” to His Source regularly. Nothing was more urgent a priority. In Mark’s Gospel, chapter one, when a virtual revival had broken out in Capernaum, Jesus had healed all day long, taught, and captured the attention of the crowds. Early the next morning, instead of continuing the momentum, Jesus “went out to a deserted place to pray.” (Mark 1:35) “Why are you out here?!” his disciples asked him incredulously; “everyone is looking for you!” In Matthew 14 after healing and teaching all day, multiplying the five loaves and two fish in that amazing miracle, he sent his disciples across the lake at night...without him. So critical was Jesus’ time alone with his heavenly Father, he went up on the mountainside by himself to pray (Matthew 14:22-23). This was Jesus’ urgent habit of prayer.

In Luke 11, Jesus was praying this way, and when he had finished we are told that the disciples came to him, “Lord, teach us to pray like that!” And out of that observation of Jesus’ habit of prayer came what we know as The Lord’s Prayer, which we recite each week in worship. It has a certain pattern to it: we are to start by addressing God in the most intimate way, “Father,”...*Abba* (in the peoples’ Hebrew, Aramaic). We are to begin by envisioning God as our loving Father, and ourselves as His beloved child. Then we remember that God is to be *revered, honored, treated as holy*. “*Hallowed be Thy name!*” We enter in to our habit of prayer, conscious of God *close in* and at the same time *high up*. And then, before bringing our own requests to our heavenly Father, we are to re-commit our lives to accomplishing *God’s* purposes, not merely our own. “*Thy Kingdom come! Thy will be done!*” This is the proper ordering of the regular Habit of Prayer.

But there is another kind of prayer we are going to talk about this week and next. Let’s call it the Crisis Prayer. It is equally valid, equally heard by our heavenly Father as is the more

ordered Habit Prayer. This is the disciples on the lake when a fierce tempest blows down upon their boat. *“Lord, save us! Lord, do you not care if we perish?!”* (Matthew 14:30, Mark 4:38) This is Jesus in Gethsemane, *“He threw himself on the ground and cried out, ‘Abba, let this cup pass from me!...’”* (Matthew 26:39)

This is the prayer a teacher prays going into the classroom, unsure how to connect with her students. “Lord, please help!” It is the prayer of the patient going into surgery; the prayer of parents about to have a difficult conversation with their teenager, “Jesus, help us!” It is the salesman going in to make an important call, a business person going into a Board Room meeting when the stakes are very high. In this crisis cry of the heart, if we can also pray, “*Your* will be done, Lord!” somehow everything is changed. If we can pray, “Thy will be done,” it changes everything, because it reminds us what truly matters at the end of the day. It is like a personal mission statement to stabilize us, an affirmation of faith; it is our moral compass, to live the Jesus-Way. It is our gift to God, and the very saying of it creates something like a conviction.

Therefore, let all who are faithful offer prayer to You;

then in a time of great distress, the rush of mighty waters

shall not reach them; for You are a hiding place for me...!

--Psalm 32:6-7

So this Prayer That Changes Everything brings us at last to peace; but it doesn't begin with peace. The prayer *“Thy will be done”* can start as a mustard seed of faith, in the midst of a panic when you are hardly able to pray at all, hardly able to hold on to believe in God. All you can do is trim the sails and hold on for dear life! But this Prayer That Changes Everything matures and grows as it is hammered out on the anvil of life's stress and personal struggle. Until at last we come home to harbor with a conviction that has become the Rock beneath our feet, “In life or in death, we belong to God!”¹

The *Letter to the Hebrews*, toward the end of the New Testament, has the most wonderful promise in it: In Jesus *“we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses; we have one who in every way has been tested as we are, yet without sin...”*

(Hebrews 4:15) If Jesus was tested in every way as we are in our fragile humanity, then I would like to know how he trembled in the face of this most frightening of prospects--going to the cross, suffering the hatred and mockery of those religious leaders he had grown up respecting; taking on the Sin of the world, experiencing the forsakenness even of his heavenly Father. I would like to know, dear God!, the timber of his voice, the shaking of his body, the tears that dropped from his eyes as he pleaded with his Father, *“Abba! LET THIS CUP PASS FROM ME!!!...”* Dear God, I would like to know how much time elapsed between his praying *“Let*

¹ *A Brief Statement of Faith*, Book of Confessions, Presbyterian Church USA.

this cup pass from me!...”, and when he prayed “...nevertheless, not my will but Thine be done.”

Was it a split second, or a moment? Was it (as appears in our Bibles,) simply two parts of a compound sentence, or was it a minute, or an hour that seemed like an eternity?

How long does it take for a soul to be shaped by the Habitual Prayer, day in and day out, “Thy will be done”? How long, then, does it take for a soul in Crisis, that clings to desire or safety, ambition or dreams, hopes or aspirations...to then pray “*Nevertheless, not my will, but Thine be done!*”?

This first prayer, “*Abba, Father, let this cup pass from me,...*” is the most famous Unanswered prayer in the entire Bible. The question, How long did it take Jesus to change his prayer?, is addressed in the text itself. Matthew tells us that Jesus prayed three times. He prayed the first time, “*Let this cup pass, ...yet not my will but Thine be done;*” he came out, found his friends sleeping. He went back a second time. He prayed the same words, Matthew says. He came back and found them asleep again. He went back *a third time* and prayed the same words. Maybe it was but three times. Maybe “three” was a figure of speech for “several times.” But there was a struggle going on here, a real struggle. Jesus was “fully human; fully divine;” that’s what our spiritual forefathers have said.² Our “high priest,” Jesus, can sympathize with our struggle because “*he was tested in every way, just like us, yet without sin.*” That’s what the author of the Letter to the Hebrews says. And because Jesus struggled, and pushed through that struggle to say Yes to God, so we can be confident that he is with us in our struggle as well!

So how does this Prayer That Changes Everything, change everything in our real worlds? Where does the Word of God find you today? Maybe your marriage is secretly on the rocks; you have reached an impasse, two ships passing in the night. Frustration and anger have caused one or the other of you to see the grass greener on the other side. Two roads diverge, and the stakes are very high. And you have a decision to make.

You’re planning a business deal that could make you a lot of money. But there is something about it that keeps gnawing at your conscience. You put it rest, but then it comes back; and you wonder. Two roads diverge, and the stakes are high; maybe higher than you know.

There is a relationship in your family that has hurt you. It may be recent, or long past. You have been hurt badly, treated unjustly, and there has been no apology or even awareness that a wrong was done. Someone needs to take the first step, and it’s clear it will not come from the other side. Maybe you haven’t talked to each other in months, or years. As unfair as it is, something in you tells you that you need to be the one. Two roads diverge. Will you swallow

² *The Nicene Creed*, Book of Confessions, Presbyterian Church USA.

your pride, forgive, and go; or will you perpetuate the cut-off and let it fester longer? Will you “take the road less traveled by”? If you do, it will “make all the difference,”³ because this is the door opened by the Prayer That Changes Everything. This is the Prayer that opened the door for Jesus to save us, and the world. This is the Prayer that opens the door for us, to change our worlds.

One final word from Henry Van Dyke:

*With eager heart and will on fire,
I strove to win my great desire.
“Peace shall be mine!”, I said;
But life grew bitter in the barren strife.*

*My soul was weary, and my pride
Was wounded deep; to Heaven I cried,
“God grant me peace, or I will die!”
The dumb stars glittered no reply.*

*Broken at last, I bowed my head,
Forgetting all myself, I said,
“Whatever comes, Thy will be done!”
And in that moment, peace was won.*

c. 1926

³ Robert Frost, “The Road Less Traveled”.