

“This is a book primarily about Jesus and secondarily about prayer. That is reflected in the subtitle *Listening to and Learning from Our Savior*. Jones guides us in listening to the prayers of Jesus for what they tell us about Jesus, and then what they tell us about prayer. Think of it as a Christology viewed through the lens of Jesus’s prayers. Jones’s purpose is much deeper than just drawing principles of prayer from the prayers of Jesus; he takes us into a deeper understanding of who Jesus is and what he has done for us, and then applies that to the prayer life of the believer in Christ.”

Donald S. Whitney, Associate Dean of the School of Theology and Professor of Biblical Spirituality, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; author, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* and *Praying the Bible*

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“In offering us a profoundly theological explanation of why our great God and Savior Jesus Christ needed to pray to his Father in the power of the Holy Spirit, Mark Jones gives us inspiration to do the same. With the assistance of some of the great Puritans of the past, and often poignantly written, *The Prayers of Jesus* is a bold and biblical exploration of this much-neglected topic.”

Lee Gatiss, Director, Church Society; author, *The Forgotten Cross*

“Christians with an appetite for knowing Jesus will find a feast in *The Prayers of Jesus*. Mark Jones serves up the finest in devotional food, teaching us how to come to the Father by observing the prayer life of his Son. I heartily commend not only the bite-size chapters but also Jones’s meaty historical and theological introduction.”

Chad Van Dixhoorn, Professor of Church History, Westminster Theological Seminary

“Few living voices have proved as trustworthy on Christology as Mark Jones. And appropriately, Jones is not just a scholar but also a pastor. Watch as the nuance and care of a scholar’s treatment of Christology takes on the heart and practical concerns of a pastor. As heaven kissed earth in the incarnation, so here Christology forms and fills the everyday life of faith, as we learn the most basic and beautiful of devotional acts from the Master, who is both holy God and fellow man. I’m not aware of another book quite like this remarkable study.”

David Mathis, Executive Editor, desiringGod.org; Pastor, Cities Church, Minneapolis/St. Paul; author, *Habits of Grace*

“Prayer, it has been said, reveals the truth of who we are. The prayers of Jesus, then, allow us to clearly see our Lord for who he truly is. From beginning to end, this is a book about Jesus. And so, for the Christian reader, this is also a delightful book—one in which every page invites us to know Christ more intimately. Read and be blessed.”

Megan Hill, author, *Praying Together* and *Contentment*; Editor, The Gospel Coalition

The Prayers of Jesus

Listening to and Learning
from Our Savior

Mark Jones

 **CROSSWAY**[®]
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To

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Finally, to the readers of this book, thank you for taking the time to read my work. I hope and pray the book will bless your soul and do you much spiritual good as you seek to listen to and learn from the Savior, Jesus Christ.

Introducing Our Praying Lord

As an author and pastor, I wouldn't want to scare off my readers with an introduction that is more difficult than the rest of the book. We have so much to learn from the prayer life of Jesus. However, understanding and appreciating our praying Lord necessitates knowing him through a good theology of Christ (Christology). Even the word *Christology* can be frightening, but it is really just the study of Christ's person and his work. So, if you can stay with me through this introduction, I believe it will be helpful for understanding the prayers of Jesus. But if you find its language a bit too technical, reading it isn't absolutely necessary for you to enjoy (and learn from) this book.

All Christians have a Christology. But can your understanding of Christ's person do justice to his prayer life so that his "loud cries and tears" (Heb. 5:7) to his Father, whom he revered with godly fear, were real and not somehow pretended?

Since the early church, theologians, even some of the greatest names known to us, have struggled to offer a meaningful account of the prayer life of Jesus of Nazareth. In a penetrating study on the Christology of Cyril of Alexandria and Nestorius, John Anthony McGuckin suggests, "Cyril would explain Jesus' prayer life as an economic exercise done largely for our instruction and edification."¹

Did Jesus, who is of the same essence with God, pray basically as an example for those who observed him? Or did Jesus, who is also of the same essence with man (possessing body and soul), pray because he needed to pray for his own sake as well as ours? If the latter, which I believe is the case, what does it mean for us to say he “needed” to pray? These are important questions, and they bring us to the heart of our Christology.

If Jesus did not pray out of necessity, then something has gone wrong with our understanding of who he is. A close examination of the references to Christ’s prayers, as well as the implications of his teaching ministry, reveals that his prayers were at the heart of his obedient and dependent life before the Father. In the face of temptation and trial, Jesus sought God, believing that God could and would help him in his time of need. But how can we speak of the “need” of One who is not just fully man but also God?

Interpreting Chalcedon

The Westminster Shorter Catechism (Q. 21) provides a valuable summary statement concerning Christ’s person: “The only Redeemer of God’s elect is the Lord Jesus Christ [John 14:6], who, being the eternal Son of God [Ps. 2:7], became man [Isa. 9:6], and so was, and continues to be, God and man in two distinct natures, and one person, forever [Acts 1:11].”

Not only does this answer ring true; there is nothing in this statement that an orthodox Christian would deny. Yet statements concerning Christ’s person (one person, two natures), even among orthodox thinkers, were historically not quite so simple. Theological conflicts prompted the Council of Chalcedon (451 AD), which resulted in the (beautifully written) Chalcedonian Creed. Some believe that Chalcedon resolved the question about what it means to affirm an orthodox view of

Christ's person. In general, this is true. But that does not mean the story is complete or fully resolved.

Not surprisingly, the two major sides in the debate, namely, the Alexandrian and Antiochene schools, may not have been fully satisfied with the outcome of Chalcedon. Who actually "won" is still disputed. Some acknowledge that both Alexandrian and Antiochene emphases can be found in the document. The Alexandrians (i.e., "the Cyrilline party") emphasized the unity of the person and his divinity, whereas the Antiochenes focused on the distinction between the two natures, aiming especially to offer a fully human Jesus. The danger of the Alexandrian position was that it could lean toward the heresy of Eutyches, whose view of Christ threatened the integrity of the two natures because of an undue emphasis on the divine nature at the expense of the human nature. On the other hand, the danger of the Antiochene position was to lean toward the heresy of Nestorianism, a view of Christ that threatened the unity of Christ's person because of an undue separation of the natures.

The matter only becomes more complicated when one considers that Nestorius, for the sake of unity, was willing to affirm that Mary was, as Cyril had strenuously affirmed, *theotokos* ("the Mother of God"; lit. "God-bearer"), though some question his integrity in this "confession." Additionally, it remains questionable whether his own theology threatened the union of human and divine natures in Christ. In other words, he had a heresy named after him that he likely did not espouse. Furthermore, Cyril sometimes makes statements that seem more Antiochene than Alexandrian. Whatever the case in this historical drama, the creed and later Reformed confessions and catechisms affirm that there are two natures in one person. The

more pressing question focuses on how these two natures relate to each other in the one person.

Western Trajectories

Leaving aside the Christology of the Eastern church—a valuable and important study in its own right—the Western church has always made a distinction between the two otherwise inseparable natures of Christ, who is of the same substance with both humanity and God. But traditions in the Western church understood the relation of these two natures somewhat differently. For example, Roman Catholic theologians generally came to the conclusion that because of the hypostatic union, Christ possessed from birth the beatific vision of God; that is, Christ walked not by faith but by sight. His human nature received all the gifts that were ever to be given to him at the moment of his incarnation. The Lutherans went in a different, more extreme, direction. They agreed with the Roman Catholic theologians that Christ received a communication of graces all at once at the incarnation. However, they also maintained that Christ also received a communication of divine attributes to the human nature at the incarnation.

Perhaps the most sophisticated version of the Lutheran model posits that the communication of attributes is unidirectional, that is, the divine attributes are communicated to the human nature and not the other way. Even so, both Roman Catholic and Lutheran theologians elevate the human nature above the boundaries set for it in Christ's life of humiliation. In this way, they cannot adequately account for development in Christ's human nature. In fact, the reality of Christ's state of humiliation comes into question: Did Christ really need to learn and be taught (Isa. 50:4)?

Moreover, one has to wonder what type of prayer life Christ had according to the Christology of those Lutherans and Roman Catholics who elevate his human nature to the degree that they do. Did Christ receive help from God in his time of need when he prayed?

Opposition to Roman Catholic and Lutheran Christology by Reformed theologians can be explained by their emphasis that “the finite is not capable of the infinite.” In response to Lutheran claims, this maxim emphasizes that the finite humanity of Christ was and (still) is not capable of receiving infinite attributes (e.g., omnipresence and omniscience). Thus, Christ’s human nature, which includes both his body and soul, experiences limitations. This remains true even though his human and divine natures are hypostatically united. Indeed, even in his state of exaltation, Christ’s glorified human nature remains distinct from his divine nature and cannot attain to or fully comprehend the divine. If it could, he would not really still be the *God-man*.

The relationship between the two natures in the one person is voluntary. The divine nature does not necessarily “engulf” the human nature, obliterating it to the mere appearance of flesh. All communications between the divine and human natures in Christ are voluntary, so that if he confesses a type of ignorance (see Mark 13:32) according to the limitations of his human nature, it is because we need to keep in mind that the divine nature does not *necessarily* reveal to his human nature all things (which is impossible). A voluntary relation between the two natures in the one person protects the integrity of Christ’s human nature so that his own prayers are really those of a man who needs to pray for the sake of his soul.

Reformed Christology

Reformed theologians insisted upon the integrity of the two natures of Christ because, as noted above, the essence of the godhead is incommunicable. So, even though Christ was a perfect man—the visible image of the invisible God—his human nature remains finite. Critics of Reformed Christology have understood this view as borderline Nestorian, and so it was vitally important for Reformed theologians to maintain that Christ’s two natures are united in a single person. Therefore, the Son of God assumed a human nature and not a human person. This *anhypostatic* (impersonal) assumption suggests that the human nature subsists only in the person of the Logos. Christ’s human nature is *enhyposstatic*, that is, becomes personal (“identified”) at the moment of the incarnation when the Logos assumed a human nature. In other words, the human nature exists in and is thereby “personalized” (hypostatized) by the Logos. This is why we do not speak of natures doing things, but rather the *person* acting according to each nature.

The Alexandrian theologians, particularly Cyril, maintained that the identity of the person is the Logos. Thus, for Cyril, the Logos acts as the agent of all that is done in the human nature, a position that potentially raises a host of problems. The potential problem with this model has to do with how the integrity of the human nature is preserved. In other words, how can we speak of truly human experiences? Moreover, ascribing suffering to the Logos while affirming divine impassibility proves to be incoherent. Consequently, many Reformed theologians have used the idea of “person” to refer to Christ in his two natures and not the Logos simpliciter (plainly/simplely). The incarnation constituted a “complex” (or, “composite”) person, which reflects the two natures of the God-man, Jesus Christ.

Following from this view of Christ's person, many Reformed theologians have spoken of the "communication of properties," which also includes the "communication of operations," since the phrases taken together reflect the person doing the work. The Westminster Confession of Faith describes these concepts in the following manner: "Christ, in the work of mediation, acts according to both natures, by each nature doing that which is proper to itself; yet, by reason of the unity of the person, that which is proper to one nature is sometimes in Scripture attributed to the person denominated by the other nature" (WCF, 8.7).

The "person" does not act through his human nature as his instrument; rather, the God-man acts according to both natures. This point of doctrine was actually a source of contention between the Reformed orthodox and various Roman Catholic writers who held that Christ performed his acts of mediation only as man.

Roman Catholic theologians, such as Robert Bellarmine, argued that Christ is Mediator not according to his divine nature but only in his human nature. Reformed theologians argued that if only Christ's human nature mediated, then another human could mediate with equal efficacy before and after the incarnation. By anchoring the natures of Christ in the unity of the person, Reformed theologians refused to speak of Christ's mediatorial work as simply the work of a human. No, Christ's mediatorial work was the work of the God-man, Jesus Christ.

Bellarmino also reasoned that if Christ mediated according to his divine nature, then the Father and the Spirit would also be Mediators. In response, Reformed theologians argued that this type of reasoning would lead to the conclusion that since the Son was made flesh, then also the Father and the Spirit were made flesh. There is essence-appropriate language: all three persons share the same divine attributes because they are all

God. But there is also persons-appropriate language: the Father is not begotten, but the Son is begotten. The Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, but the Father does not proceed from the Spirit, and so forth. Personal properties may differ among a shared divine essence.

Affirming that Christ mediates according to both natures as one person enables us to understand a passage such as Acts 20:28, which speaks of the church being purchased by the blood of God. Based on the communication of properties and operations, Reformed theologians had no problem saying that God died—even though it was impossible for Christ’s divine nature to suffer or die—because his work is attributed to the whole person. The whole Christ is God and man because this speaks of the person, but the whole *of* Christ is not God and man because a distinction between the two natures must be maintained.² So, may we sing that glorious hymn “And Can It Be?,” especially the words “how can it be that thou, my God, shouldst die for me?” Based on the doctrine of the communication of properties, the answer is yes!

The above shows that Reformed Christology had its own distinctive emphases when compared with Catholic and Lutheran accounts of the person of Christ. Most readers would find nothing too controversial in the account above. However, in the Puritan tradition, for example, one finds a somewhat unique and distinctive emphasis on the role of the Spirit in relation to the person of Christ in order to bring coherence to the relations between the two natures of Christ.

The Christological Role of the Spirit

Most Christians assume that Christ was able to perform miracles because he was God. That certainly is true. However, if we argue, for example, that Christ’s divine nature necessarily

and always acts through the human nature, thus enabling him to perform miracles, a serious problem emerges concerning the plethora of texts that speak of the Holy Spirit's role in the life of Christ. This was the problem that Cyril's position was unable to fully overcome. By affirming that the Logos was the sole effective agent working on the human nature, Cyril's asymmetrical relation between the two natures rendered the Holy Spirit's work in the life of Jesus basically superfluous. Even Socinian theologians in the seventeenth century recognized this tension in classical Christology. What was the point of the Holy Spirit being given to Christ, they asked, if he is fully God?

The Christological genius of John Owen (1616–1683) becomes evident at precisely this point. Neither Roman Catholic nor Lutheran theologians can adequately account for any meaningful role of the Holy Spirit in the life of Christ. Indeed, their account of the relation between the two natures cannot sufficiently explain why Christ received the Holy Spirit without measure. Roman Catholic and Lutheran theologians generally do not know what to do with Christ's gifts and graces (e.g., faith and hope). However, Owen, as well as others, had his own way of explaining the relation of Christ's two natures. To my knowledge, this had not been as clearly articulated by anyone before him. One of his chief concerns was to protect the integrity of Christ's two natures. In so doing he made a rather bold contention that the only singular immediate act of the Son of God on the human nature was taking it into subsistence with himself. Every other act upon Christ's human nature was from the Holy Spirit. Christ performed his miracles through the power of the Holy Spirit, not immediately by his own divine power.

In other words, the divine nature acted not immediately by virtue of the hypostatic union, but mediately by means of the

Holy Spirit. The conventional way of understanding Christ's miracles has typically been to argue that Christ performs miracles by virtue of his own divine nature. But on Owen's (and others') model, the Holy Spirit is the immediate author of Christ's graces. This manner of understanding the relation of the Spirit to the human nature preserves the humanness of Jesus Christ and answers a host of exegetical questions.

It seems that some Christians imagine that Christ's divine nature takes the place of his soul. This idea, though well intended, is wrong. Christ was a perfect man with a rational soul as the immediate principle of his moral actions. In other words, Christ had a human self-consciousness. Some might say that the person of the Son is Christ's self-consciousness, but as some Reformed theologians argued, personality is not an act but the mode or identity of a thing. Importantly, Christ's humanity, both body and soul, does not get lost in his divinity. Because of this, Christ's humanity needed the Holy Spirit in order to have communion with God. His prayers to God were never simply the prayers of a man, nor even the prayers of the God-man to the Father; but more specifically they were the prayers of the Son of God to the Father in the power of the Spirit. Never was a prayer uttered before God from the lips of Christ that did not have the Holy Spirit working powerfully in his human nature to enable him to speak the words the Father had given him to speak. In this way, we aim to pray as our Lord prayed: in the Spirit.

Christ's inseparable companion during his earthly ministry as a true man was the Holy Spirit. Therefore, at all of the major events in the life of Christ, the Holy Spirit took a prominent role. The Holy Spirit was the immediate divine efficient cause of the incarnation (Matt. 1:18, 20; Luke 1:35). This was a fitting

“beginning” for Christ since Isaiah spoke of the Messiah as one endowed with the Spirit (Isa. 42:1; 61:1).

The New Testament confirms Isaiah’s testimony in several places, noting, for example, that Christ received the Spirit without measure (John 3:34). At Jesus’s baptism the Spirit descended upon him (Matt. 3:16); and in Luke 4 the Spirit plays a significant role in leading Christ to and sustaining him before, during, and after his temptation (vv. 1, 14). In that same chapter Jesus reads from Isaiah 61:1–2 (“the Spirit of the Lord is upon me”) and announces that he is the fulfillment of that prophecy (Luke 4:21). Christ performed miracles in the power of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 12:18; Acts 10:38). Hebrews 9:14 may be taken to mean that Christ offered himself up not by his own spirit but by the enabling of the Holy Spirit. Like his death, Christ’s resurrection is attributed to the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:11), and by it he “was declared to be the Son of God . . . according to the Spirit of holiness” (Rom. 1:4; see also 1 Tim. 3:16; 1 Pet. 3:18). Because the Spirit was Christ’s inseparable companion during his earthly ministry, there is little doubt that Christ called out (i.e., prayed) to his Father by the enabling of the Spirit, which would put an implicit Christological emphasis upon Romans 8:26–27. The preponderance of references to the role of the Holy Spirit in the ministry of Christ finds its best explanation in the Reformed interpretative tradition.

Conclusion

Given the basic Christology above, Hugh Martin (1821–1885) argued that Jesus

inevitably placed himself, therefore, in a position of acknowledged weakness and infirmity—of absolute dependence on God—a dependence to be exercised and expressed

in the adorations and supplications of prayer. He was made of a woman, made under the law—under the law of prayer, as of other ordinances and duties—the law by which a man can receive nothing except it be given him from heaven, and except the Lord be inquired of for it (Ezek. 36:37).³

Christ exercised, according to his human nature, faith, love, reverence, delight, and all the graces proper to a true human nature in the power of the Holy Spirit. Thus, he naturally would have desired to offer vocal requests and supplications to his Father in heaven. He would have also praised God with the knowledge he had of his Father. Additionally, he would have sought God out with a holy determination, making all other duties subservient to the duty of communion with God. In other words, true and proper humanity is realized only in communion with God.

For Christ to forsake prayer would have detracted from his true humanity. But, as we shall see, his devotion to God in prayer argues otherwise. That God truly became flesh (John 1:14) is powerfully manifested in our praying Lord.

Jesus Prayed from His Mother's Breasts

Psalm 22:9–10

Yet you are he who took me from the womb;
you made me trust you at my mother's breasts.
On you was I cast from my birth,
and from my mother's womb you have been my God.

A Holy Beginning

Given what we know about Christ's parents, particularly his mother Mary, the "favored one" (Luke 1:28), there can be little doubt that our Lord was raised in a pious, God-fearing household. All of the advantages that he needed to be a faithful Mediator were graciously bestowed upon him from his heavenly Father. Naturally, that would have included a family that raised

him to know and love the Lord his God. Jesus was a faithful covenant child, a true Israelite in whom there was no deceit.

A child raised in a God-fearing household receives an inestimable blessing. True, to whom much is given much will be required (Luke 12:48). And in the case of the Lord Jesus, much was required of him, which means much was given to him. As we read in Psalm 84:11:

For the LORD God is a sun and shield;
the LORD bestows favor and honor.
No good thing does he withhold
from those who walk uprightly.

God delighted in blessing his only begotten Son from conception and will do so for all eternity.

In the first place, Jesus was a child of the covenant. He was not raised in a pagan environment, having to fend for himself in terms of his religious life.¹ Rather, circumcised on the eighth day, he not only possessed the sign of the covenant—a sign of God’s covenant faithfulness to his people (Rom. 4:11)—but also received a name that was to be a badge, daily reminding him of his extraordinarily high calling as God’s Messiah (Luke 2:21). This was to affirm Christ’s solidarity with his father (Joseph) and the covenantal community of which he was a part. Not even our Lord entered the world as a neutral individual. Rather, he was in corporate solidarity with the community of faith (Gal. 3:16–29).

Just as our own identity leads to action, so too with Christ: his identity was the ground for how he lived. “Be who you are” is a statement true of Christ himself and thereby fitting also for his holy people (i.e., we are holy, so we live holy lives).

The key to understanding Christ’s religious life from the womb is to insist that his faith was not solely for him but also for others

(i.e., his people). Remember, Christ is the natural Son of God, so his adoption is never in question: he belongs to God. He would impart his own spiritual blessings (e.g., faith, hope, love) to his people by sending his Spirit into their hearts (see John 14–16).

His religious life began from the womb. Psalm 22 finds its ultimate fulfillment in Christ, though its immediate story is that of David. The Father prepared a body for Christ, which was formed by the Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary. According to the natural limits of his humanity, Christ's early prayer life was clearly not as developed as it would be at the end of his life. Experience is a great teacher for our prayers, and the more he experienced, the more his prayers would develop in light of those experiences, challenges, and struggles.

Whatever acts of consent were possible toward the Father, involving the deliberate use of his human will, Christ performed perfectly, but also appropriately according to his age and stage in life. His acts of reason were married together with the holy principles in his heart formed by the Holy Spirit. His heart, soul, mind, and strength all directed his actions in a manner appropriate to his age and capacity for spiritual acts of reason. He possessed the habit of faith from the womb, which would then bring forth particular acts of faith at the appropriate time in response to God and his Word.

God took Christ "from the womb" and "made" him trust at his mother's breasts (Ps. 22:9). Christ trusted God, but not as though he alone was responsible for his acts of faith toward God. Rather, the Father sustained him so that Christ's religious life was faithful from the womb to the tomb. In another psalm the reality of spiritual life from the very beginning of our existence comes into focus:

For you, O Lord, are my hope,
my trust, O LORD, from my youth.

Upon you I have leaned from before my birth;
you are he who took me from my mother's womb.
My praise is continually of you. (Ps. 71:5–6)

If these words are true of the psalmist, how much more are they true of the Son of God! Christ not only trusted from his youth but also leaned on God from before birth. How very different is this Hebrew idea of spirituality, which allows for and celebrates the faith of children from the womb, compared with our rationalistic views today.

We may appreciate the reality of the spiritual life of the young because God is the initiator of true spirituality, and we are not. The Father is never shy regarding his help toward his Son, the righteous servant.

Behold my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my Spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations. (Isa. 42:1)

God upheld his Son in order that the Son, whether eating or drinking, might bring glory to God (1 Cor. 10:31). As the Son was cast upon the Father from birth, there was never a time when the Father was not his God (Ps. 22:10). Not only Psalm 22 but also Psalm 8 speaks of the reality of Christ's religious life from the womb:

Out of the mouth of babies and infants,
you have established strength because of your foes,
to still the enemy and the avenger. (Ps. 8:2)

Charles Spurgeon (1834–1892) asks, “Was our Lord so early a believer? Was he one of those babes and sucklings out of whose mouths strength is ordained? So it would seem; and

if so, what a plea for help!”² Our Lord, the pioneer of our faith (Heb. 12:2)—meaning he himself lived by faith in God—was never without the graces of faith, hope, and love. As John Calvin (1509–1564) argued:

Truly, Christ was sanctified from earliest infancy in order that he might sanctify in himself his elect from every age without distinction. . . . Thus, he was conceived of the Holy Spirit in order that, in the flesh taken, fully imbued with the holiness of the Spirit, he might impart that holiness to us. If we have in Christ the most perfect example of all the graces which God bestows upon his children, in this respect also he will be for us a proof that the age of infancy is not utterly averse to sanctification.³

In other words, the holy life of Christ from the beginning, we are told, was one of conscious awareness of God because God made it so. Jesus’s life of dependence on and awareness of God his Father was axiomatic to his existence as a true human being made in God’s image and sustained by the Spirit of the living God. As natural as it was for him to breath God’s air, so too he found it the most natural thing in the world to look to God, by faith, in order to know him and delight in him. Truly, if anyone prayed without ceasing—from his first breath to his last—it was Jesus of Nazareth (1 Thess. 5:17).

A Holy Teenager

As Jesus grew older, we are told, he became “strong, filled with wisdom”—God’s favor (grace) was upon him (Luke 2:40). By age twelve Jesus would have possessed a deep knowledge of God, but a knowledge filled with filial devotion to his heavenly Father. The temple incident in Luke 2, when Jesus remained in Jerusalem, shows that he was asking and answering questions

that amazed others (vv. 46–47). After a rebuke from his parents, who had been searching for him for days, Jesus informed them that he was doing what was appropriate: “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” (v. 49). After this, Luke informs his readers that Jesus “increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man” (v. 52).

God comes first. This was the radical principle of Christ’s actions during his life. Not his parents’ will, however important it was for him to be submissive to them; not his own will, however natural a thing that would be for a holy, undefiled person; but the will of his Father was omnipotent in the life of the Son of God.

Speaking of Christ’s earlier years, David M. M’Intyre suggests that Christ would

join not only in the worship of the home, but also in the prayers of the synagogue, breathing into them, without doubt, a deeper meaning than that which lay in the mere letter of the word, as He supplicated Heaven’s mercy, not only on His fellow-townsmen of Nazareth, but on all the people of Israel and on the Seventy Nations beyond.⁴

What a story the youth of our Savior would be, with his faithful allegiance to Yahweh each day as preparation for his public ministry.

The habits of grace overflowed in his heart, giving him the perpetual knowledge that he must be about his Father’s business. So in whatever context he found himself, the prayers of young Jesus would have been a great delight to him as his Father prepared him, morning by morning (Isa. 50:4–6), for the battle that would quickly come to the One who alone could bring many sons to glory (Heb. 2:10).

Given that Christ's public ministry did not formally begin until he was baptized, we may, without too much speculation, conjecture that his private life was one of regular, fervent prayer in the presence of his Father. God so endowed his Son with the Spirit of holiness that the preparation of the Messiah in large part took place in the school of communion with God.

A Holy Pattern

Just as there seems to be no reason to doubt the spontaneous, free, and natural pattern of Christ's occasional prayers as he grew up, there seems no good reason to doubt that the shape for Christ's own prayer life came from the Psalms. Consider, for example, the language of Psalm 17 and how the words were especially designed for him to pray to his Father. After all, if David could say these words with integrity, how much more the One who was without sin!

Hear a just cause, O LORD; attend to my cry!

Give ear to my prayer from lips free of deceit!

From your presence let my vindication come!

Let your eyes behold the right!

You have tried my heart, you have visited me by night,

you have tested me, and you will find nothing;

I have purposed that my mouth will not transgress. . . .

Keep me as the apple of your eye;

hide me in the shadow of your wings. . . .

As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness;

when I awake, I shall be satisfied with your likeness.

(vv. 1–3, 8, 15)

No one could pray these words in quite the same way as our Savior. He alone was truly free of deceit. So his desire for

vindication (1 Tim. 3:16) was natural. Christ purposed that his mouth would not transgress (Ps. 17:3)—a prayer that highlights the backbone of our salvation. The One with whom the Father publicly declared he was well pleased was the same One who had prayed that God would keep him as the apple of his eye (Ps. 17:8). With such an intimate relationship, Christ beheld the face of God and was satisfied with his likeness (Ps. 17:15).

We may go even further: the words of the Psalms are the words of the Son of God. What the Son had declared to his people through the Spirit in the Psalms of the Old Testament he now takes to his (human) lips as he makes use of the words that he himself brought about through the experiences, trials, joys, and sufferings of his servants. What an amazing thought that Christ should prepare words for himself to use in his own prayers.

Our Lord came into this world with the graces needed to live out his calling as the Son of God. As such, he had not only the abilities to live in constant communion with God, but also the identity that he was someone peculiar: the God-man. Such abilities and awareness, coupled with the Father's resolve to have his Son know him, provide us with the proper context for the prayers of Jesus and why his life was lived in constant communion with his heavenly Father. Furnished with the Spirit, his life was a constant Trinitarian activity: the Son communing with the Father in the power of the Spirit. Just as he first called upon the Lord by the power of the Spirit working upon his human nature, so his last words were calling upon the Lord by the Spirit (Luke 23:46; Heb. 9:14).

We should note the importance of starting well in life: it is easier to develop patterns and habits at an early age than to pick up those habits later in life for the first time. For some this is not

possible, due to their life circumstances (e.g., growing up in a non-Christian household). But in believing households, children must therefore be taught to pray, by faith, as early as possible and as frequently as they are able. In Scripture there are patterns for us to follow, words for us to use to help us in our prayers. God does not expect his own Son to be left alone to figure out how to pray. Thus, he certainly would not leave us to ourselves in so important a spiritual discipline.

Jesus Prayed “Abba! Father”

John 17:1

Father, the hour has come; glorify your
Son that the Son may glorify you.

My Father

The first recorded words of Jesus in Luke 2 speak of his allegiance to his Father when he tells of his business in his Father's house. The last recorded words of Jesus speak of his trust in his Father as he cries out, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” And, Luke adds, “having said this he breathed his last” (Luke 23:46).

Any study on the prayer life of the Son of God must take into account the fact, especially observed in the Gospel accounts, that Jesus habitually and fervently prayed to his Father

in heaven. This may at first seem to us to be quite ordinary, until we probe further.

Referring to God in prayer as “my Father” was virtually unheard of during Christ’s time. Jews typically referred to God in prayer as “Yahweh,” “my Lord,” “my God,” or “God of my father.” The words of Christ simply have no precedence: “At that time Jesus declared, ‘I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth . . .’” (Matt. 11:25). As New Testament scholar Joachim Jeremias says, “We can say quite deliberately that there is no analogy at all in the whole literature of Jewish prayer for God being addressed as *Abba*. This assertion applies not only to fixed liturgical prayer, but also to free prayer, of which many examples have been handed down to us in Talmudic literature.”¹

Thus, Jesus revolutionized prayer in a way that did justice to the radical nature of his ministry. With no previous examples of faithful Jews addressing God as “Father” in prayer, the supremely faithful Jew referred to God as “Father” almost exclusively in his recorded prayers. There must have been a very good reason for this development.

The Aramaic word *abba* refers to a father-child relationship. Before Christ’s time, Aramaic-speaking children would learn to refer to their parents as *abba* and *imma*. During Christ’s life, not only small children but also grown children would refer to their fathers as *abba*. Yet, to address God as *abba* would have been deemed disrespectful by Jews. What our Lord did was new and, as I said, revolutionary in how to approach God. If Jesus were not who he was, we would have grounds for joining with the Jews in accusing him of blasphemy: “This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God” (John 5:18).

Because of Jesus's unique and therefore special relationship to the Father, it remains most appropriate to address him as such. As the eternal Son of the Father, he enjoyed an intimate relationship with the Father that manifests itself clearly in the audible prayer of Matthew 11:27: "All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." Given the intimacy clearly revealed in the mutual knowledge that the Father and Son possessed of one another, Jesus rightly related to him as Father and paved the way for us to do the same.

Consider, as well, that because of the uniqueness of the eternal relationship between persons of the Trinity, Christ addressed God as Father in practically all circumstances, even the most dire: "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will" (Matt. 26:39). This bold request from the incarnate Christ found its impetus in the infinite intimacy with which he related to the Father from eternity. At the same time, the arrival of the Son in the flesh provided a new way of relating to God. Prayer became a deeply intimate conversation between God the Father and his people because of Christ's person and work in bringing us to such a place.

The Spirit of Adoption

Besides his unique relationship to the Father as the Son of God, Jesus also called upon the Father through the powerful indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. We find the Spirit referred to as the Spirit not only of the Father (Matt. 10:20) but also of the Son (Gal. 4:6). The Spirit provides the bond of the Trinity and, with it, the union of love between the Father and the Son.

Thus, it should come as little surprise to us that in his earthly ministry as the God-man, the Messiah manifested himself as the man of the Spirit *par excellence*. Indeed, Isaiah foretold this hundreds of years before the birth of Christ:

And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him,
the Spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and might,
the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.
(Isa. 11:2)

Behold my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my Spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations. (Isa. 42:1)

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor. (Isa. 61:1)

The Holy Spirit related to Christ as his inseparable earthly and (even now more so) heavenly companion. He was poured into Christ's heart that Christ might naturally, frequently, and joyfully call upon God as "Abba! Father!" (Rom. 8:15). The Spirit bore witness to his spirit that he was the Son of God (cf. Rom. 8:16). The Spirit bears witness to us that we are children of God; but this is true only because the Spirit comes from the hand of Christ who enables us to share in the joy he had as the Son of God.

Given the intimacy of his relationship to the Father, Christ would have experienced the deepest agony, frustration, and unhappiness if he could not call upon him as such. It would have constituted an essential denial of "paternity." But since no one else can claim existence as the Only Begotten of the Father,

Christ possessed the unique joy and privilege of revealing God in this manner to those aware of his messianic calling.

Charles Spurgeon says, “If any man of woman born might have lived without prayer it was surely the Lord Jesus Christ.”² Rather, should we not maintain the exact opposite? While it is true that we, who have remaining sin, need to pray, there was a necessity placed upon Christ to pray because of his natural relation to the Father. Likewise, the powerful indwelling of the Spirit provoked within him a habitual cry for communion.

Adam as the son of God had happiness, since he knew that he received perfect gifts as a son from a father. The relationship was not merely one of love but also one of a Father’s love for his son. The Father gave Adam the Holy Spirit for this purpose, just as he did the last Adam, Jesus Christ, for whom he confirmed his blessed fatherly relationship. We, through Christ, enter into this “confirmation” from the work of the Spirit, who definitely and perpetually seals our relationship to God (Eph. 1:13–14).

Union with the Son

Jesus taught his disciples to pray, “Our Father in heaven . . .” (Matt. 6:9). The Son of God to whom we are united by faith makes this special title for addressing God possible. Christ’s eternal and natural sonship provides the foundation for the adoption of believers, who call upon God as Father as part of his family (Eph. 1:5; 2:19). As adopted children of God, we belong to his, not Satan’s, family. Our attitude toward God in prayer arises out of our standing before him as his children.

Strikingly, our Lord joins our sonship to his own in John 20:17, when he says to Mary, “Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say

to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’”

Our salvation has many benefits, one of which includes God sending the “Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” (Gal. 4:6). Just as Christ cried, “Abba! Father” (Mark 14:36) by the power of the Spirit, we must and will do the same.

This privilege of address by faith, in union with Christ, by the power of the Spirit, will never end. Even in the world to come, our “familiar conversation with God,” as many loosely call prayer, will remain forever. Our residence in heaven with our Father and Savior will in no way change our relation to him as children of God. With that in mind, Christ, as the heavenly God-man, keeps perpetually the joy of calling upon and maintaining communion with his Father, even as he so beautifully displayed by faith on earth.

Jesus Prayed in Secret

Luke 5:16

But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray.

Intentional Private Devotion

With such an abundance of love for his Father, Jesus sought him in secret for the reward of joyous fellowship arising out of such an intimate approach. After all, our Lord says, “But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Matt. 6:6). Jesus took this reality seriously, as the Father rewards those who, believing he exists, seek him (Heb. 11:6).

Numerous Synoptic Gospel references highlight Christ’s prayers: Matthew 14:23; Mark 1:35; 6:46; 14:36; Luke 3:21; 5:16; 6:12; 9:18, 28ff. Jesus represents a new “Daniel,” the

first Daniel having pointed to Christ when he “went to his house” and “got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as he had done previously” (Dan. 6:10). Daniel prayed in a crisis here, but in connection with a common pattern of personal piety before the Lord. As we would expect, our Savior manifested the grace of this Old Testament prophet in a much superior abundance. Indeed, he necessarily exhibited far greater communion, quantitatively and qualitatively, than any saint we encounter in the Bible.

Early in the Morning

Jews began their day with prayer, the first order of business of dependent, faithful, believers in the true and living God. Many Christians today are more likely to check their phones as the first priority. Instead of communing with God, we naturally prefer to “commune” with other humans, some of whom we do not even know (e.g., on Facebook).

As a faithful Jew, Jesus rose “very early in the morning, while it was still dark,” and went to pray in a “desolate place” (Mark 1:35). He left Capernaum to pray alone. Here, Mark possibly likens this act to Israel’s sojourn in the wilderness, where they should have fellowshiped with God. Interestingly, Jesus’s prayers in Mark’s Gospel are always solitary (1:35; 6:46; 14:32–39) and in connection to either explicit or implicit opposition to his ministry. Action, in the form of compassion, immediately followed his prayers and suggests that Jesus never took matters purely into his own hands. He always performed the will of the Father while seeking him in a spirit of total dependence, evidenced by his prayers. He sought guidance and confirmation that he was indeed doing his Father’s will, which explains in part his rigorous and sustained prayer life.

New Testament accounts clearly show that Jesus lived neither as a reclusive hermit nor as a maniacal social butterfly. He manifested himself as both a highly visible public and a behind-the-scenes private man. As is often the case, public faithfulness or failure remains directly proportional to the faithfulness or failure in private. Jesus knew that these tendencies went together. Few run a publicly good race to the end in their ministries who have not been faithful in private with their covenant God.

Often in the moral failures of evangelical leaders, public failure arises not out of a vacuum but from behind closed doors. A public fiasco always involves a private mess. Not so with our Savior. His public ministry before God depended intimately on his private communion with him. One without the other would have proved fatal.

In many contexts, Christ withdrew to pray not only for communion with the Father but also in the sense that his disciples lacked understanding regarding his mission. He would need to pray not only for his own understanding of God's will but also for their understanding of God's will because of the crucial role they would eventually end up playing in God's purposes. "Your will be done" was never an exclusive request for himself but was also for others to join with him in accomplishing the will of God.

Times of crisis usually bring us to prayer more than anything else in the world. They come as gifts from God to prompt our acceptance of personal weakness and limitations in order that we may depend on his immeasurable power and provision. That was, in a sense, true of Christ, who faced many calamities connected to not only his enemies but also his friends. In the end, he knew that all of these trials came ultimately from his sovereign Lord. Jesus was "weak" in the sense that he had to faithfully tread the path set by his Father, which led to his being crucified

in weakness (2 Cor. 13:4). In other words, we ourselves are “weak” when we give up control and hand it over to God; but, of course, like Christ, that is when we are truly strong! Praise God for crises, both large and small: they bring us to him and reveal our weakness.

Christ Alone

Luke also records several instances of Christ praying, often alone:

- “Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened” (Luke 3:21).
- “And when it was day, he departed and went into a desolate place . . .” (Luke 4:42).
- “But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray” (Luke 5:16).
- “In these days he went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God” (Luke 6:12).
- “Now it happened that as he was praying alone, the disciples were with him. And he asked them, ‘Who do the crowds say that I am?’” (Luke 9:18).
- “Now about eight days after these sayings he took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray” (Luke 9:28).

Matthew does the same:

- “And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone” (Matt. 14:23).
- “Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, ‘Sit here, while I go over there and pray’” (Matt. 26:36).

Not all of the references to Christ's prayers denote solitary ones. Nonetheless, the Gospel writers frequently make mention of Christ purposefully withdrawing to spend time with his heavenly Father. Surely, these records exist not simply for our observation but also for our observance. The godly life, we may say, involves both public worship and private communion, as Christ exhibited on our behalf and for our example.

Prayer as Preparation

One particularly striking reference in Luke speaks of Jesus praying all night: "In these days he went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God" (Luke 6:12). When one considers how many Christians today struggle to maintain more than a few minutes in sustained prayer with God at one time, this account rattles most of us. We need not remain in such a condition. Let us begin by marveling how Christ always placed the needs of the kingdom and us before his own, even if it meant sleepless nights. Let us then prayerfully determine to do the same out of devotion to him and others.

The mountain was a place not only for isolation but also where theophanies and divine revelations took place as revealed in Jewish literature (e.g., Exodus 19). Certainly, Christ's choice of the Twelve established a new leadership in Israel while censuring the (blind) religious leaders of the day—a choice made not alone but in line with his Father's will. In spite of the close communion Jesus would develop with these twelve men, he also knew that one would betray him unto death. These significant choices for Jesus on behalf of his people demanded intense prayer as he simultaneously embraced the Father's will and prepared for the treachery to come at the hands of Judas.

Later on, Jesus asked his disciples, whom he had chosen through prayer, concerning “who” he was (Luke 9:18, 20). Was he praying that they would recognize his messianic identity? If so, he got his answer with Peter’s confession of him as “the Christ of God” (v. 20). Far from such an answer prompting Jesus to pride, it would remind him of the misery to come for God’s Messiah. Thus, immediately after Peter’s confession, Christ reminded them, “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised” (v. 22). Contrary to the desires of the people for a conquering Messiah, Jesus knew that the path to triumph necessarily led through the valley of humiliation. Prayer prepared him for this.

Rewarded

In Matthew 6:6 Jesus promises his disciples that their Father will reward them when they pray in secret. In that one chapter, the word *reward* occurs seven times, which unquestionably points us to the blessings our Father gives in response to private prayer.

We do not have because we do not ask (James 4:2), and that exposes our lack of faith (Matt. 21:22). Christ asked because he had such strong faith. In turn, he wants to draw us near to God in faith, believing that he exists and that he will reward those who seek him (Heb. 11:6). As we see in John’s Gospel, Jesus believed God existed, drew near to him, and also prayed for his reward: “And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed” (John 17:5). We must do likewise, as long as we do so biblically.

We struggle when it comes to private prayer. Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) wrote a sermon “Hypocrites Deficient in the Duty of Prayer,” which in some respects stirs up more convic-

tion than his justly famous sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” Ordinarily, false converts are the ones deficient in private prayer. Yet, even the most godly saints find quality prayer in private a toil. With this in mind, let us look for help to the godliest man ever, our Lord Jesus Christ, a man of private prayer.

Some emphasize the idea of a Christian’s “quiet time” at the expense of the more important duty of public worship. Others so prioritize corporate worship that they minimize the role of private prayer. Instead, we must see this not as an either–or but as a both–and matter. Our triune God, who meets with us in a glorious way at corporate worship, also remains pleased to commune with us anytime during the course of our daily lives, especially in private prayer. Jesus spent time not only in the synagogue and temple but also in private communion. The former should naturally lead to the latter. Private and public worship are friends that help each other.