

A strong prayer life

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[0 : 00] All right, good morning to you all on a rather chilly morning. All right, now we're coming to the end of a series that I have been doing with you guys called Foundations.

We've been looking at foundations in the Christian life. We've been thinking about a world without foundations. There are so many people today, as you know, who live in a world without hope, who live in a world without meaning.

And we've been looking at the foundations that the Christian life offers in a world without foundations. And today we're going to wrap up with prayer.

What we're going to be doing is we're going to be looking at the life of Jesus and we're going to be looking at his prayer life, particularly from the Gospel of Luke. So I do encourage you to have your Bible open there in the Gospel of Luke.

And we are going to look at Jesus' prayer life in Luke's Gospel. We're going to be doing that in order to be inspired afresh in our own prayer life.

[1 : 16] Because Jesus presents to us an incredible example. There are so many untapped treasures for us to discover in Jesus' own prayer life.

So that's what we're going to be doing. We're going to be looking at one or two passages, not in too much detail, as we consider Jesus' prayer life. And as we get into the topic, I first of all want to just lay out four introductory comments about Jesus' prayer life as we begin.

The first comment I want to make is that, interestingly, his prayer life, like ours, wasn't always easy. I suspect we are tempted to believe that as God's Son, Jesus' prayer life was plain sailing because he always knew what God was going to do in his life and he always knew how God was going to answer his prayers well in advance.

Well, I'm not always convinced of that. Obviously, when we start talking about Jesus' humanity and his humanity as related to his divinity, because we know that Jesus is both man and God, we are on mysterious territory.

The Bible doesn't always give us the answers that we want, but I don't think that his prayer life was always plain sailing. When he walked as a man in this world, I think he struggled from time to time.

[3 : 01] For example, Hebrews 7, chapter 5, verse 7, says this, In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to him who were in the days of prayer.

Sometimes we pray and we struggle in prayer. It's a comfort for us to know that our Savior in his humanity didn't always find it easy.

In fact, Jesus' prayer life was probably the great battlefield on which he had to fight his great temptations.

So that's the first observation. Our Savior, as an example to us, also found his prayer life to be difficult.

Now, secondly, prayer, when it comes to the Lord Jesus, was one of the primary areas where he learned about his mission, I think.

[4 : 11] He learned from God. He learned from his Father. And he entered into a deeper understanding of his mission as the Savior of the world, believe it or not, through his prayer life.

In other words, I don't think necessarily that Jesus knew right from his infancy, from his childhood, that he was automatically called to be the Messiah in his humanity.

If he grew like us, if he is completely human as we are, we have to appreciate the fact that he grew as a man in his knowledge.

Now, again, I know that we're entering into great mystery here, but I suspect that Jesus learned about his role and his mission as our Savior through hours of prayer, the power of the Spirit, and the

reading of the Bible.

And as he combined these activities in his life as a man, as a young man, slowly through the Spirit, God's call was formed in his mind.

[5 : 35] Just because he is God's Son as a man doesn't necessarily mean that the Father just supplied all of his prayers with neat answers.

And yet his life and his ministry was defined by prayer in a way that most of us, I don't think, fully appreciate and understand. Prayer is what made him, who he is as our Savior, as a man who had come down from heaven, and assumed flesh to die for us on the cross.

Every step that Jesus took to the cross was bathed in prayer. Again, I don't think necessarily from a child, from a very young child, Jesus knew in every detail that the Father wanted him to tread this terrible path to the cross.

It was something that he came to understand and realize as he grew in the power of the Spirit as a man in his humanity and as he prayed.

So secondly, his prayer was one of the primary areas where he learned. He learned about himself, learned about his mission, learned about the Father's purpose for his life.

[7 : 06] Thirdly, when you read the New Testament, you discover that for Jesus, prayer was absolutely natural to him. He didn't have to hear sermons like we do on prayer in order to be motivated to pray.

It was something that just came naturally to him right from a young age, remember that occasion where his parents lost him, when they visited Jerusalem and they were already on their way home and they couldn't find their son.

Those of us as parents can understand just how stressful that must have been. And they went back and where did they find him? They found him in his father's house. In Luke chapter 2 verse 49 we read, and he said to them, his parents found him, he said to them, why are you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my father's house? And so he was certainly aware of a very close and a special relationship with his father from a young age, and without question, prayer was something that came naturally to him.

All right, let me make another observation, and that is his prayers were striking to others. Luke chapter 11 and verse 1, our reading from this morning, Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, Lord, teach us to pray.

[8 : 33] That is striking, isn't it? It wasn't as if the disciples were not praying up to that point, but when they heard Jesus pray, there was something strikingly different about his prayers.

There was something very powerful about his prayers that we should ponder this morning. Now, with those comments in mind, what is interesting about Luke's gospel, because more than the other gospels, Luke describes Jesus at prayer at key or turning points in his ministry.

Very, very important. It's very interesting to see this. Key moments in his ministry, Jesus prayed. In Luke's gospel, there are seven places where Jesus is described as praying.

Again, at points in his ministry when his ministry probably hung in the balance. We're not going to look at all of those seven today.

We're just going to look at one or two. But if you've got your Bible, let's first of all have a look at Luke 3 from verse 19 to verse 23, because here Jesus prays at his baptism.

[9 : 55] He's been living in relative obscurity up to this point. It's before his public ministry. He's no doubt been working as a carpenter.

Now the time comes for him to enter into the spotlight. Now, interestingly, Luke does not actually share the contents of Jesus' prayers.

That's interesting. But he does share the occasions when Jesus prayed. Luke wants us, I suspect, to appreciate the timing of Jesus' prayers, when Jesus prayed.

And when we consider when Jesus prayed, we can get a pretty good idea of why he prayed. Now, in the passage, Jesus, as we know, allowed himself to be baptized by John the Baptist, even though he didn't need to be baptized by John, because John baptized on the occasion of repentance.

John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. The sinners in Israel who had come to John for baptism, to indicate their repentance of sin.

[11 : 20] Jesus wasn't a sinner. And yet Jesus offers himself for baptism, reflecting his willingness to be identified with sinful humanity, as one who would represent sinners on the cross.

And so he comes to John, and he offers himself up for baptism in this public forum at the Jordan River.

And unlike the same account described by the other gospel writers, what is interesting about Luke's description is that Luke describes Jesus praying throughout, before and while the baptism took place, he was praying.

And then the heavens were opened, and the Spirit is seen descending upon the Lord Jesus Christ. So Luke shows how the Spirit of God descends upon Christ in direct response to Jesus' prayers. I'm sure that this was a turning point in Jesus' life. He had to confirm in his own thoughts and in this decision what his future vocation was to be.

[12:54] In his humanity, no doubt he pondered through much prayer, much reading of Scripture about the coming Messiah, with the guidance of the Spirit.

He had to ponder the question, Am I the one chosen by God to take away the sin of the world? Am I the one one day would have to take the sin of the world upon myself?

And as he offers himself to John for baptism, I suspect that he knew at this point that this was the crossroads of his life, the point of no return.

in a way I suspect we can't fully understand the momentous nature, folks, of that decision.

I suspect he knew that the time had come. This was a point of no return. And he does so with much prayer because he knew that this decision would mean that he would have to leave his private, quiet life forever.

[14:14] And that he would become a target of Satan and many, many others. And prayer was at the heart of this fundamental moment.

To choose this path ultimately would mean to choose death. And he prayed all the time during his baptism.

In fact, all of subsequent world history rested on this decision. And who knows, quite possibly this one single prayer.

Think about it for a moment. All of world history, the prayer of our Savior in the Jordan River baptized by John. God rewarded his perfect choice and his prayer by opening the heavens and sending the Spirit, thus confirming and commissioning him to be the Savior of the world, the promised Messiah.

He had read the Old Testament concerning himself correctly. He had understood and he obeyed the prompting of the Spirit. And thus, the Father wonderfully confirmed and commissioned him at this stage, at this point, to be the Savior of the world.

[15:43] And I believe that the rest of Jesus' life, his death and resurrection could be traced back to this defining moment, this defining prayer.

Prayer, certainly in the life of our Savior, can be this powerful. Surely this must be one of the most powerful prayers in the history of the world, if not the most significant prayer.

But we also observe Jesus praying, secondly, when he has to choose for and against worldly fame. That's also interesting.

He prays at the height of his healing ministry. End of Mark chapter 1 and Luke chapter 5 from verse 15 to verse 19 we read, but now even more, the report about him.

When went abroad and great crowds gathered to hear him and had to be healed of, to hear him and to be healed of their infirmities, but he would withdraw to desolate places and pray.

[16:56] Is that not fascinating? The end of Mark's gospel, you know the story, Jesus has become famous in Mark chapter 1. Jesus has become famous and everybody's coming to be healed.

It's almost as if these folk felt that Jesus was a kind of a vending machine, handing out prayers, and Jesus disappears.

And Peter is confused thinking now's not the time to pray, we've got the press out there, we've got the news anchors, we've got CNN, now's the time to get famous.

No doubt Peter was thinking about his new condominium there by the Sea of Galilee, fame and fortune. And Jesus disappears up the mountain to pray. And Peter says, what are you doing here?

And Jesus is finishing his prayers and says to Peter, we must leave and move to the next town so that I can preach. But Jesus prays, not only in Luke but also in Mark, at the height of his fame.

[18:10] He started out on his public ministry, he's been baptized, he's in his ministry, God is endorsing his ministry in this unprecedented way. No other prophet, no other healer, no other preacher has seen such incredible response and power.

And most of us, of course, think we merely need to pray when we're in trouble. When we go through hard times, when we're facing struggles and challenges and anxieties, when we see no success in life, when we're struggling at home, or perhaps we're struggling in our marriages, or struggling in the workplace, struggling financially, and we pray, and we think, well, those are the times when we need to pray.

Isn't it interesting that Jesus prayed when he was at his most successful and powerful? Now, that is interesting as well. Perhaps we've got a model here that we also need to pray when we are at our most successful and most comfortable and most powerful in life because it is here when we might indeed fall into the greatest temptation.

Frequently, Luke describes how during those months of great success, people were seeking him out. He would withdraw from the busyness of the world.

He would withdraw from all the craziness. Everybody wanted a piece of him, no doubt. Everybody, at least for some time, at least, wanted to be his friend.

[19 : 44] People wanted to take advantage of him. No doubt folk wanted to own him for their cause and he would withdraw no doubt to get perspective.

What am I really doing? Why am I really here? He didn't want to go down the wrong road and turn his life and his healing ministry and his fame into something focused on himself.

Isn't that what the devil tempted him to do? It's exactly what the devil wanted him to do. There's times when we're doing well financially. I've seen that as a pastor.

Members in my congregation in Pretoria. Just think of a couple of guys that started businesses and did well, made a lot of money, got a lot of attention from a lot of people, people, and how pride so easily comes in and become arrogant so easily.

One man that I know who will remain nameless was my warden, became very, very famous, got a big promotion, and turned his back on the gospel.

[20 : 59] Today, I don't think he worships any longer. A lot of money, nice car, big mansion. Isn't it interesting that Jesus prayed precisely at those moments when he would have been tempted to focus on himself and not his father?

That is how important this kind of prayer was. Prayer helps us to get away from the world. Prayer helps us to get perspective.

the kind of perspective that we just don't get anywhere else. Something for us to think about. So secondly, Jesus is praying, he doesn't only pray at his baptism, at this turning point in his life where he becomes aware of the father's calling, but secondly, he prays at the height of his fame, at the height of his healing ministry, when there is that temptation to abandon the path that God has called him to follow.

Thirdly, also observe that he prays as he considers the momentous choice of the twelve disciples in Luke 6. Luke 6 from 12 to 13, in these days he went to the mountain to pray, and all night, it's the only reference we have, I think, in the New Testament to somebody praying all night.

All night, he continued in prayer to God, and when day came, called his disciples and chose from them twelve whom he named apostles.

[22 : 40] Now, once again, you've got to think about how momentous this choice is. The whole history of the church, the writing of the New Testament, is going to depend on this choice.

The choice of the men who would lead the church into the apostolic and the post-apostolic age. Notice that it would appear, could be wrong, but I think that the father, once again, the father didn't just send him a text or an email telling him these are the twelve guys.

He had to pray that one through. He needed wisdom. I love that reference to Jesus as a young teenager in Luke, speaks about how he grew in wisdom.

I see the wisdom in these turning points of his life. He prays through this great momentous decision. Of course, he's got to choose the one he knows who will betray him as well.

He's got to pray that decision through. I wonder how many of us pray through our major decisions. We normally come to God and ask him to endorse the decisions we've already made.

[23 : 56] Isn't that sad? But not the Lord Jesus. Thinks about the leaders of the church. It's a momentous decision. And he had to make this decision in the midst of all kinds of stress in his life and in his ministry.

You know, I have to say to you that I've made the mistake under stress, under pressure, of making a major decision, which was the wrong decision because I never thought it through sufficiently and I

never asked God enough for wisdom.

I never really bathed those decisions in prayer. I've made that mistake and I've regretted it. But the Lord Jesus is not willing to allow the stress and the pressure of his life to prevent him from praying through the major decisions.

Somebody offered me some great advice as a young man. He said to me, if you're not sure about it, don't do it. If you're not sure, pray about it first. Seek advice. Don't be in a hurry to make a major decision.

Pray about it. Now, Jesus is very, very busy at that time in that particular passage if you check the context. In verse 11, there's opposition, there's pressure. He's got lots of things he's got to focus on at that time.

[25 : 17] You can imagine being the Son of God. You can imagine all the people flocking to see him, people who want to experience his power. He's got lots of things to worry about.

We might suggest that, well, you know, he had no time to pray. He'd rather put prayer on hold until he's done what he's got to do and then go and pray. But the Lord Jesus knew that he had no choice.

You get the impression that he was impelled to pray. He knew that he had to pray. I suspect he knew that the busier he was on earth, fulfilling his task as the savior of the world, the busier that he was, the more time he would have to spend communing with his father in heaven.

That's striking, isn't it? Because for us, it's the other way around. When I've got time, I might pray, but not the Lord Jesus Christ.

And yet, like us, Jesus is fully human. He walked on earth as a human being. He suffered through all the temptations we go through. And this meant that, like all Christians, his example is that we need to use prayer as a means to process the will of God for our lives.

[26 : 40] God's. And I get the impression on the basis of my experience in the ministry that the busier I am and the more stressed I am, the more pressing the need for prayer becomes.

But I think that in the modern world that we live today, we just run from one crisis to the other, don't we? Sometimes I think that the devil really just gets us to wander away from God simply by making sure that we stay busy.

That our schedules are so hectic, we just don't have time to pray and to read the Bible. And the Lord Jesus would not allow that to happen. He would not allow his external circumstances and other people to prevent him from spending time in prayer.

He wouldn't allow it. Get an iron discipline. And then, of course, my next observation, the Lord Jesus' encouragement to us to persist in prayer not to give up in Luke 11 from verse 1 to 10.

Now, here we've got Luke's version, as read out to us a bit earlier, of the Lord's prayer. But what's interesting about Luke's version of the Lord's prayer is that once he's taught the disciples how to pray, he then gives a little parable in which he encourages the church to persist in prayer and not give up.

[28 : 06] Because the Lord Jesus knows that that's exactly what we're going to be tempted to do. He gives a story of this chap who's gone to bed and it's at midnight and his friend comes along and says to him, knocks on the door and says, please can I have three loaves?

A friend of mine has come and I've got to feed this guy and I need food and he knocks on the door of his neighbor and he says, please let me in, please can I borrow, please can I have some food? food. Well, I don't think it gets as cold in Palestine as it gets here, but who knows. Imagine somebody knocking on your door in the middle of the night. Well, I don't think I would want to get up either.

And the Lord Jesus says that if this guy just keeps on knocking on the door and asking for help, in the end the guy is going to get out of bed and despite being a little bit selfish and enjoying the warmth of his bed, he's going to get up and he's going to give him something to eat.

And then in verse 8, I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his impudence it will be given to you. Seek and you will find, knock and it will be opened to you.

[29 : 15] Jesus is saying, what Jesus is saying is that prayer is powerful. It's a very, very powerful teaching. Jesus is saying prayer does make a difference.

And he knows that as the church, and as Christians, we're going to be tempted not to believe that. Knock and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds,

and the one who knocks, it will be opened.

Now, Jesus gave this teaching not so much just for the disciples, but for us. He knew that we would be tempted not to pray regularly enough, because like him, we find it hard work, and a lot of the time, it appears that our prayers are ineffective.

But Jesus implies that our own prayer lives will be critically important in the future life of the church, because like his life, it's going to be through prayer that we will find strength to endure to the end as we wait for his return.

Reminded of the challenge and the struggle that Simon Peter went through. Luke chapter 22, just before Jesus' death, from verse 30 to verse 34, Simon, Simon, says Jesus, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail, and when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.

[30 : 52] Peter said to him, Lord, I'm ready to go with you to both prison and to death. And Jesus said, I tell you, Peter, the rooster will not crow this day until you deny me three times that you know me.

What I find interesting here again is that Jesus had to pray for Peter, for Simon. Why? Well, because Simon wasn't praying at a time when he should have been praying.

See, I don't think that our need today is just to call one another to pray, but I think we also here should ponder the question of why it is that many of us are not praying in the first place.

I think that there's something deeply wrong with a prayerless church and prayerless Christians. And many, many churches are like that.

many Christians are like that. And Jesus clearly perceived that when the church should be praying, like Peter, she failed to see her need to pray.

[32 : 07] He saw at this moment in Peter's own life, Peter is about to deny the Savior three times. minds. Can you see how arrogant Peter is? Jesus has the perception to see that Peter's faith is wavering.

Peter doesn't think he needs to pray, Lord, I'm ready to go with you to death. But Jesus has the penetration and the wisdom into seeing Peter's heart, realizing that Peter's courage is all bluster. it's not real. And Peter's not praying when he should have been praying. Folks, why is it that like Peter, we are not praying as we should?

Is it because like Peter, we have this kind of false confidence in our own strength? faith? We don't have the need for prayer? I wonder whether or not for some of us we don't pray because deep down inside we don't really think Jesus is alive to hear our prayers.

Others of us perhaps simply do not believe in the power of prayer. Still others of us find life to be so comfortable that we just don't feel the need to pray.

[33 : 30] In a comfortable middle-class society, what do we do in the face of our problems? We throw our money at our problems, don't we? We've got a nice medical aid, we're comfortable, we're rich, we have a nice roof over our heads, we're healthy, we're warm on a winter's morning, well we don't need prayer.

You'll find that people living in poverty in different parts of Africa are often prayer warriors because they don't enjoy the materialism that we enjoy.

See materialist societies are often prayerless societies. How many of us are going to come to that prayer meeting on Wednesday night? Let me challenge you. That's too cold. I'd rather sit at home in front of the television.

When you're comfortable, you don't really believe that prayer is needed. We see the same problem with the disciples here in the Garden of God's Seminary. We see it with Peter.

Peter is blind to the spiritual crisis that is unfolding before his eyes because he's not praying. He's unaware of what's at stake and he falls asleep in the midst of it all.

[34 : 45] Do we also not sleep on those occasions when we ought to be praying? Well in conclusion, there's no doubt that Jesus' prayers empowered his life, guiding him to the cross and they were therefore partly responsible for the world's salvation.

Surely he challenges all of us here today to rethink our prayer lives. For those of us who have absolutely no motivation to prayer, Jesus' challenge to those of us is simply this, are you my children at all?

Are you a Christian? If you have no real motivation to pray, I think compared to Jesus, those of us who do pray well, our prayers are mostly just a kind of appendix tagged on to the rest of our busy

lives and after we have lived the way that we have chosen to live, then we might make our major decisions.

Then we might turn to God in prayer. I know that's true of my life. Unlike Jesus, for many Christians today, prayer does not drive us.

It's true, is it not? Prayer does not drive our lives. Prayer does not shape us. For most of us, there's no grappling in prayer.

[36 : 09] There's no spending the night in prayer. There's no pursuit of God the Father in prayer. And yet this is how Jesus prayed. And if this is how potent prayer indeed was in the shaping of the life of our Savior, can you imagine how regular prayer could transform your life?

Let me ask you, does your spiritual life this morning possibly lack power and conviction? Why do you think it seems to be going nowhere?

perhaps you are here in a backslidden state before God? Why do you think that that is the case?

Can the answer be that you have never, since your professed conversion, been a person of prayer?

So I challenge you as I need to challenge myself today, will you not leave here in a few moments and join us for some tea and coffee and some fellowship, but will you not leave here a little bit later on with a renewed determination?

A renewed determination to place prayer at the center of your life and your existence. You do that.

Again, I'm reminded of the words of that wonderful hymn, O what peace we often forfeit!

[37 : 42] O what needless pain we bear! All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer.
Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.