

“Mountaintop Experiences: The Quiet Mountainside”

“I’ll pray for you.” Those words often are, and certainly should be, very comforting. Not only do they mean that someone is concerned about what’s going on in your life, but they also mean that person is going to bring those cares and concerns to God himself. But I’ve also heard it suggested that those words make up the most frequent lie that Christians tell each other. Unfortunately, I think there might be some truth to that assessment. I don’t mean that people aren’t genuine when they say, “I’ll pray for you.” But I do believe that the prayer lives of many, often including myself, fall well short of the expectations that they set. I do believe that many people who have said, “I’ll pray for you” eventually forget that pledge and forget to pray. And even if you don’t find yourself among those who promise to pray but don’t carry it out, you can probably identify the weaknesses and shortcomings of your own prayer life.

The Mountaintop Experience that we consider today provides the solution to all of those weaknesses and shortcomings. It is the antidote to an unfulfilled prayer promise and every other sinful shortcoming in this area of our lives. This Mountaintop Experience is Jesus praying for us. It is Jesus praying for you.

The reason this event makes our list of Mountaintop Experiences is that the Gospel writer reports how Jesus went out on his own to a mountainside for his prayer. That was his chosen place to escape some of the crowds and to find a peaceful opportunity to address his heavenly Father.

Besides the location, though, the Bible tells us very little about Jesus’ prayer. Jesus spent the whole night in prayer, so we know something about the time and effort that he devoted to this, but there is no mention of the content of his prayer. While we can’t identify the content of this prayer precisely, we can make some reasonable assumptions based on the context of the prayer. After spending the night praying, Jesus had some important work to do. He made an organizational arrangement that would have a major impact on the spread of the gospel. He brought to himself his disciples and appointed the twelve, the apostles. You heard the list of names. They had been disciples, or students, along with others who followed Jesus and learned from him. But for these twelve, there was a new responsibility. They were apostles. They were the ones sent out. That’s what the word means. They would be the ones to take the lead in going out with God’s Word to share Jesus with others, especially following Jesus’ death and resurrection.

So let’s go back to how this would have shaped what Jesus prayed for. As he prepared to choose and send out the twelve, he no doubt prayed for them. He would have prayed that God would strengthen them for the work, that they would learn well the message that they would be sharing and that they would share it with a bold confidence. And I strongly suspect that Jesus would also have prayed for the people who would come in contact with the message through those apostles. He would have prayed that they receive it in faith and then that their faith would persevere through whatever challenges it faced.

And it’s not just the fact that this prayer came before the selection of the twelve that suggests these things to me. I can look elsewhere to find prayers of Jesus where he prays for these same things. One famous prayer of Jesus is recorded in John chapter 17. There he prays for his disciples and these apostles who were about to witness his betrayal, suffering, and death. And his prayer at that time didn’t end there. He went on to pray for all those who would hear the message from the apostles and as a result of their work.

In other words, on both of these occasions, Jesus prayed for you. We can trace the spread of the gospel from the mouths and pens of the apostles until today. It is as a result of their work and the way that God used them that you have had the opportunity to hear and learn the good news that Jesus is your Savior. So when I say that he prayed for you, I mean that he made you and your faith and the course of human history that led to it the object of his prayer. He prayed for that things that would affect you and your spiritual life.

Jesus prays for you. It is what happened on the quiet mountainside, and it happened in many other places and at many other times through Jesus’ ministry. Because when I say that Jesus prayed for you, I don’t just mean that he prayed for the events and circumstances of your life. I also mean that he prayed in your place.

Remember those weaknesses and shortcomings in our prayer lives that we mentioned at the beginning of this sermon? Remember the suggestion that each of us has failed to make use of this incredible gift of God in the best way possible? Think about it, God has said that for you he has an open door policy. You can come to him at any time to tell him of your wants and needs, your cares and concerns, your hopes and your dreams, your requests and petitions, and your thanksgiving. And far too often we don't. We forget. We feel on some level that we need to take care of things ourselves, that we need to work harder or smarter. We act as if God doesn't have the power to help us, or as if God doesn't have the desire to help us. And perhaps even worse, we pray for so many things that only serve our sinful nature and our desire to have what we want and to have things our way without necessarily considering God's will for us and for our lives.

See, even in this area of the gift that God has given to us of prayer to him, the ability to go directly to his throne, we find reminders of our sinfulness. We find evidence that our hearts are inclined in the wrong direction and that our attitudes are selfish and self-centered. We find confirmation that apart from the grace of God, we deserve nothing but punishment.

But we witness God's grace in action as we watch Jesus walk to that mountainside, drop to his knees, bow his head, and pray. We see God's grace in action as we watch Jesus remain there in the quiet solitude for the whole night. This is God's grace in action because in those moments and hours of prayer Jesus is doing what we should have done but didn't. In those moments and hours Jesus is doing in our place what we have failed to do. Here is one who makes perfect use of prayer. Here is one whose attitudes and actions are exactly in line with his Father's will. He's praying unselfishly for you and for me and for those who would hear us repeat the message to them.

This is God's grace in action, that in every aspect of our lives Jesus took our place and did so perfectly and completely. That is the righteousness that he gives you in exchange for your sins. That's the perfect life that was sacrificed on the cross for you. That's the reason that your sins are forgiven and so nothing, absolutely nothing, stands between you and God when you pray to him.

So we really can't leave the mountainside without taking a few notes about how the prayer life of Jesus should inform and affect our own prayer lives. One thing we'll note is that taking time to pray was a regular practice for Jesus. There are numerous gospel accounts that mention Jesus praying. On all sorts of occasions, Jesus prays. We, too, can pray for all sorts of things in all sorts of times and places.

And what about those places? Jesus made the effort to get away from the crowds and to find a quiet place. As we've mentioned, this isn't the only place that Jesus would have prayed, and in fact sometimes we hear how he prayed in a crowd. But on this occasion, Jesus went away from potential distractions and interruptions in order to spend the night in prayer. We, too, can find those quiet places for prayer, away from the television or the computer, away from other distractions and interruptions, where we can pray and focus on what we are saying.

And of course Jesus always prayed for things that were pleasing to his heavenly Father. He prayed for the spread of his Word and for the people that he served. He prayed for strength for those who needed it. He gave thanks to his Father for his many blessings. Jesus even taught his disciples a model prayer so that they would know the sorts of things for which to pray. We'll join in a few minutes in speaking the Lord's Prayer together. It is full of God-pleasing petitions, full of prayers for spiritual matters. Our prayer life ought to, like the Lord's Prayer does, reflect our faith and our interest in the things of God.

I'll pray for you. It can be a comforting promise that we share. Let's carry it out, too. Let's go to God with appropriate requests in all sorts of situations. We can pray for each other because Jesus prayed for us. That's what we learn at the quiet mountainside.

The text: Luke 6:12–16 (NIV84)

¹²One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. ¹³When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles: ¹⁴Simon (whom he named Peter), his brother Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, ¹⁵Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Simon who was called the Zealot, ¹⁶Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.