

And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed. And Simon and those who were with him searched for him, and they found him and said to him, “Everyone is looking for you.” And he said to them, “Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out.” And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons.

(Mark 1:35–39)

Introduction

Recently, the United States suffered another evil and tragic murderous gun attack in a school—this time in the state of Texas. Many people, as is to be both expected and appreciated, have expressed their prayerful support for victims who survived, and for the families of those who did not. The Governor of Texas, Gregg Abbott, an openly committed follower of Christ, said, “We need to do more than just pray for the victims and their families. It’s time in Texas that we take action to step up and make sure this tragedy is never repeated ever again.” Well said. I think that we would all agree with this. Prayer is necessary, but so is action. An esteemed pastor of another era, John Bunyan, would also agree.

Bunyan once wrote, “You can do more than pray, after you have prayed, but you cannot do more than pray until you have prayed.” Bunyan understood that praying and doing go hand in hand. He grasped that the Christian needs to be on her knees, but also on her feet. Bunyan grasped that praying and practical go hand in hand. But most importantly, he understood the right order; he understand that prayer takes priority: first prayer, then action. No doubt, he learned this from the Lord Jesus Christ. Perhaps he learned it from the passage on which we are focusing in this study.

The passage before us serves as a powerful example of this truth. Here we see Jesus praying—and then doing more than praying.

Dear Christian, and, especially church member, what place does prayer have in your life? Is it a priority? Or are you perhaps like me, who all too often gives in to the temptation to think, “I’m too busy to pray”? I like the title of Bill Hybels’s book on prayer: *Too Busy Not To Pray*. This might be a good summary of the verse before us.

In this study, I want us to learn about the priority of prayer in the life of Jesus so that we might follow him more faithfully and more fruitfully to the place of prayer. If we do, I

suspect that, like Jesus, we will find our life taking shape according to God's plan and purpose for us.

We will examine this passage under four questions.

When Did Jesus Pray?

The first question we must ask is, when did Jesus pray? Mark tells us: "And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark" (v. 35).

The descriptive words used here are meant to emphasize the time of this praying. "Very early" is used only by Mark in the New Testament. It is a word that speaks of a time before daybreak, during the final watch of the night (i.e. between 3:00 AM and 6:00 AM).

Why the emphasis? Perhaps to indicate its importance, its priority. Note a few things about the timing of this prayer.

First, Jesus prayed when he was tired. He had had a busy day previously, but now he was awake early. When we are tired, we need to pray.

Second, Jesus prayed when he was triumphant. He had experienced great victories just hours earlier. He did not rest on his laurels when he experienced victory, but went to his knees. We will develop this below.

Third, Jesus prayed when he was tried. His popularity would test his commitment to God's plan. Our temptations don't come only when things are going bad. Trials come in good times and bad, and we must be committed to pray at all times.

Fourth, Jesus prayed when he was alone and in the dark. We could legitimately say that he prayed before he faced the traffic. We could also say that he prayed before he talked and before he trained. He knew that another day of intense discipleship lay before him, and so he prayed.

The point is that he started his day with God, not with man. All of these timing observations will be noted again as we continue our study.

Where Did Jesus Pray?

The second question to ask is, where did Jesus pray? Again, the text is clear: "He departed and went out to a desolate place" (v. 35).

The word translated “desolate place” is used frequently in this opening chapter (vv. 3, 4, 12, 13, 45), and it appears again in 6:31, 32, 35. In this latter passage, prayer will also feature. The word can be translated “wilderness.”

The wilderness motif is conspicuous. But, to what does it refer?

You will remember from earlier studies that Jesus was the perfect Israel. He was a perfect Son, unlike Israel, who failed as God’s Son (cf. Exodus 4:22–23).

The wilderness features heavily in this opening chapter, and there is much here that features a recapitulation of Israel’s history. James Edwards is spot on when he observes that Jesus returning over and over to the wilderness is for the purpose of “reflecting Israel’s sojourn in the wilderness following the Exodus,” where the wilderness was clearly “a place of repentance, restoration, and fellowship with God.” It was also a place of conflict.

We can summarize all of this by saying that where Jesus prayed was a place to experience fellowship with God. That is the design of God for the wilderness. That is God’s design for your wilderness. It is to get you to pray.

Before applying this we must note a vital lesson: Praying in the wilderness may keep you out of exile.

Jesus, the perfect Israel, prioritised prayer and never displeased the Lord. He was never under God’s chastening, at least for his own sins. He never sinned. That was not the case with Israel.

In the Old Testament, Israel is seen praying most often in exile, not in the wilderness. The great examples of prayer are Daniel, Ezra and Nehemiah (see chapter 9 of each of these books). Psalm 137 portrays Israel praying desperately in exile.

If we do not prioritise prayer in the wilderness, we may find ourselves forced to pray in exile. We *will* pray. The question is, *where* will we pray – in the land of opportunity or land of chastening?

Perhaps you are in a wilderness of new life in Christ – a wilderness of triumph. You are currently enjoying a new appetite, new struggles, new opportunities to experience and to know God. Prayer is a huge part of this.

Perhaps yours is a wilderness of temptations and trial at school, in the workplace, in relationships, at home, in the nation, or at church. Will you pray in your wilderness?

Are you in a wilderness of crisis – a world in which you are desperately tired? Perhaps you are exerting yourself relationally, emotionally, spiritually or physically. What will you do? Get alone and pray in the dark. It is never too late to pray, but early is better than later (cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:17; Ephesians 6:18).

At BBC, we have had triumphs. As I write these words, we are being tried, and many of us are tired. Let us pray!

Why Did Jesus Pray?

The third question to ask is, why did Jesus pray? The answer is found in vv. 36–38: “And Simon and those who were with him searched for him, and they found him and said to him, ‘Everyone is looking for you.’ And he said to them, ‘Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out’” (Mark 1:36–38).

This, of course, is a vital question, and it is clear that the disciples (in this case, Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John), needed to learn the answer. This is indicated by their response when they awoke and found that Jesus was gone. “And Simon and those who were with him searched for him.”

The Problem of Popularity

The record of the disciples searching for Jesus must be properly understood: “And Simon and those who were with him searched for him, and they found him and said to him, ‘Everyone is looking for you’” (Mark 1:36–37).

A superficial understanding of these words may give us the wrong idea that these disciples were seeking the presence of Jesus, that they were seeking his fellowship, that they were missing him with heartfelt love. This text reveals why this interpretation is wrong.

First, the word translated “searched” implies impatience. It speaks of hunting and often carries with it the sense of hostility. Peter and those with him were irritated that Jesus was gone. Perhaps they were perturbed that he had left the house without telling them. After all, the crowds were back.

This leads us to the second proof that their searching for Jesus was not as healthy as we might first think: “and they found him and said to him, ‘Everyone is looking for you.’” They did not say, “We miss you, Lord. We just want to be with you. Please teach us.” No, they complained. Didn’t he know that people in town needed him? Perhaps they were hurt that he had placed them in a bad spot. It was perhaps embarrassing for them that, even as people came looking for him for help, he was gone. Perhaps they had a skewed vision of what it

means to fish for me. “Don’t you realise, Lord, the great opportunity you have here to promote your ministry?”

We know from other Gospel accounts that tensions were rising from the religious elite. If Jesus would continue to do good, perhaps opposition would stop. After all, practical involvement in alleviation of physical sufferings – helping those who are oppressed, caring for the poor, etc. – can turn the tide of popular opinion that may initially be sceptical if not hostile. These disciples may have been thinking, “Lord, you are blowing it! Now, get back here and do some miracles.” They were about to learn that disciples don’t dictate the direction of the kingdom. This is a good lesson for all of us to learn.

Interestingly, this passage reveals not only Jesus at prayer, but also the disciples. They came to Jesus asking for something. But what they asked for was wrongheaded. I can relate to this group. Can you? They were exemplifying what James wrote about: “You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions” (James 4:2b–3).

To my shame, I, too – and too often – come to Jesus not for him, but for what he can give to me. I know what it is to treat God like a Cosmic Takealot (or, for our international readers, a Cosmic Amazon). We impatiently and selfishly seek him in order to get something rather than coming to him to get him. The lyrics of the song “Even If” by Mercy Me speak to this:

They say sometimes you win some,
sometimes you lose some,
and right now – right now – I’m losing bad.

I’ve stood on this stage night after night,
reminding the broken it’ll be alright,
but right now – oh right now – I just can’t.

It’s easy to sing when there’s nothing to bring me down,
but what will I say when I’m held to the flame like I am right now.

I know you’re able and I know you can
save through the fire with your mighty hand,
but even if you don’t my hope is you alone.

I know the sorrow, and I know the hurt
would all go away if you’d just say the word,
but even if you don’t my hope is you alone.

I wept as I considered these words. To my shame, I also become impatient with the Lord. I expect for him to meet my needs, or the needs of my loved ones, when I want him to. I don't understand why he seems to have departed.

To my shame, I sometimes become self-centredly embarrassed when the Lord does not build his church as quickly as I think that he should. I feel as if I need to try and persuade the Lord to make him, and the church, more popular, more powerful, more relevant.

And so I find this passage helpful – because in it we are instructed that prayer helps us to submit to the King's agenda. In fact, this is the primary purpose that Jesus was praying.

Jesus prayed for many reasons. But, in the context, perhaps two needs were prominent: power, and – perhaps *most* prominently – perspective

Jesus Prayed for Power

Ministry to the broken is exhausting. When Jesus healed, he was literally drained of power (see 5:30). We can become weary in well-doing (Galatians 6:9). There is always the cost that in fishing for men. We become weary in the work, and this can lead us to become weary of the work. Prayer is fuel that keeps such debilitating weariness at bay.

Jesus prayed because Jesus was a human being. At the incarnation he took on human flesh – the form of a servant. He became human. Yes, he was God, but he was also human. We dare not minimise this aspect of his person. And because he was human he was tempted in all points as we are. Because he was human, Jesus was susceptible to fatigue, to discouragement, to emotional and spiritual and physical exhaustion. So he prayed.

We too need to pray, or we will not persevere to the end. Jesus teaches this to his disciples in the final occurrence in Mark where we see him in prayer, “Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Mark 14:38).

Prayer is a confession of need, an admission of weakness, a practical declaration of dependence. And it is a plea for power – a plea for God. If we will fish for men, as Jesus demands of us, we must pray. Church, we must pray. And we have the privilege to pray in the wilderness.

At BBC, we fairly recently transitioned from a more traditional preaching-focused evening service to a more prayer-focused service. The implementation was admittedly clumsy (the fault of the elders), but many, if not most, of our membership are happy for the change. Corporately we share needs and then corporately we join our voices in prayer. The sound of the corporate amen is an encouragement.

Some have missed the smaller prayer groups we previously had on a Sunday evening. I understand that. The elders understand that. But the corporate nature of together confessing our need and admitting our weakness is necessary and constructive. When we join our hearts in this corporate declaration of dependence and agreement in prayer, there is something special about it.

The changed format has resulted in more people praying on a Sunday night. Let's consider one another rather than merely our own desires and preferences. There is nothing hindering any of us from arranging a meeting with a few individuals for more "intimate" prayer – either before or after a service on Sunday. It is the Lord's Day – make the most of it.

Let's consider BBC's need for spiritual power and respond on our knees. The apostle Paul asked for prayer on several occasions. If he required the prayers of God's people for his ministry, how much more do the ministers that you know; the ministers who minister to you? Brethren, pray for us.

But there is a wider application here. Mothers need power in order to influence their children for Christ. Single young and older adults need power to persevere in purity and in joy and in purpose. Christians in the marketplace need the power of God to be refreshed to live for Christ there. Christians professionals need the power that can only come from God. Christians in the university need this power if they will be effective fishers of men. Christian husbands need God's strength if they will lead their wives in godliness and in godly security. They need God's power if they will sacrificially lead their wives. Children need the power of God if they will joyfully submit to their parents.

I think you get the point! Whatever your calling, Christian, you need the ability that God gives to overcome the world, flesh and the devil.

Jesus Prayed for Perspective

We must not miss the historical context. Jesus had just spent a very long day experiencing spiritual success after spiritual success. He had been hailed as an impactful teacher, and had become famous for healing and for casting out demons. He had been commended and celebrated. He had been a success. And what did he prioritise? Prayer.

Too Successful Not to Pray

It is when we are successful that most of us do not pray. When things are going well, we tend to neglect prayer. But we learn from Jesus that his burden to pray was fuelled by his success. This burden to seek the face of his Father was so strong that he arose very early in the morning to pray. Success did not go to his head, it went to his knees. He went to his knees.

As we have seen, because he was human, Jesus was tempted in all points as we are. In the midst of success and celebration by the community, so early in his ministry, Jesus could have been tempted to lose sight of the Father's purpose for him. But most dangerously, Jesus could have lost sight of the Father. He could have been tempted to carry out his ministry with self-sufficiency, rather than with the spirit of John 12:49–50: "For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment – what to say and what to speak. And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me."

In John 8, Jesus taught his complete dependence upon the Father when he said,

So Jesus said to them, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me. And he who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to him." As he was saying these things, many believed in him.

(John 8:28–30)

Perhaps there is no more important time to pray than when things are apparently going well. When things are going well for a church – when the building is full and members are maturing – that is the time to work more on prioritising prayer. When things are going well in your marriage, make the most of prayer. When you are experiencing wonderful communion with God and great victory over sin, pray. When your children are showing evidences of grace, make much of prayer. When your financial situation is blessed, get on your knees. When you are commended by your employer, seek God. When the examinations are passed and the distinctions are achieved, get on your knees before it goes to your head! When your career is soaring, rise early to pray.

Dear brothers and sisters, if we don't prayerfully respond in our successes, then our successes will probably ruin us.

Success can skew our perspective. It can lead to compromise, a sense of self-sufficiency, arrogance and pride, irreverence as we lose sight of God, comfortable living rather than cross-centred and cross-driven living, and neglect of responsibilities. Ultimately, all of the above can occur because of a false sense or source of identity.

Prayer is a huge antidote to this. Prayer reminds us of our insufficiency (cf. 2 Corinthians 3:5). Remember, when things are going well, it is because of the grace of God. Success should humble us rather than going to our heads. We should have bowed heads, not big heads. As Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 4). As the rich fool (Luke 12:13–21). As the Jewish religious leaders of Jesus' day.

The Priority of Proclamation

In v. 38, we see that Jesus prioritised proclamation: “And he said to them, ‘Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out.’”

We can fairly assume that, when the disciples found Jesus and made their appeal for him to hurry back with them, they were dumbfounded, if not a little perturbed, when he answered them, “Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out.” We see a here a couple of lessons for us.

First, God answered Jesus’ prayer. Jesus kept his God-ordained perspective. He would not give in to the temptation to be a popular miracle-worker but would rather devote himself to faithfully preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God – even though such proclamation will lead to his murder.

Jesus was so devoted to his Father that he would not allow success to divert him from the path the Father had designed for him. Popularity was not the plan, the passion was. Being celebrated was not God’s goal for his Son, being crucified was. Being famous for healing was not the divinely charted purpose; being murdered and then rising again was the purpose. Yes, fame was on the divine agenda, but such fame was to be the result of humiliation of the cross. Then, and only then, would exaltation take place.

Prayer is so important when seeking to do God’s will. Word-driven prayer helps to keep us focused. It is not so much illumination that we often need (though sometimes we need this), but rather perspective about what we already know. Prayer is an aid to guard us from being distracted from doing God’s will. In other words, prayer is not so much about discerning the will of God but about doing the will of God. The Bible is clear about God’s will for every Christian (to be saved, to be sanctified, to serve the church, to evangelize and make disciples—wherever we are and whatever legitimate thing we are doing), but we need God’s enablement to do these. Prayer gives to us perspective in the midst of walking by faith.

Second, preaching the gospel trumps any other ministry. Doing good is usually safer than declaring the gospel. And that has not changed. That is why we need to keep praying: so that we will keep preaching.

We have touched on this already, but social justice, feeding the poor, and caring for oppressed are wonderful things that Christians should be doing as we have opportunity (Galatians 6:10). But none of these are the main thing we are to be doing. Proclamation is at the top of the list.

In his excellent book, *Good News to the Poor*, Tim Chester writes, “The proclamation of the gospel must be at the heart of Christian social involvement. Our aim will always be that the poor are blessed in this life and for all eternity.” You could replace the word “the poor” with “the oppressed” or “the sick” and the point remains the same: Preaching the gospel must remain our priority and prayer will fuel this priority.

What Happened When Jesus Prayed?

The fourth question is, what happened when Jesus prayed. Verse 39 shows us: “And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons.” Quite simply, others were blessed.

Jesus went from his knees to his feet and departed to preach in synagogues throughout Galilee. And, as in Capernaum, he confronted and conquered demons. Many were blessed by his ministry. Many were blessed when, empowered through prayer, he moved from Capernaum to their towns.

When we pray as we ought, the gospel progresses to others who need it like we do – like our families, our friends, and our community and nation (cf. Matthew 9:35–38).

But not only do our prayers result in others being blessed by the spread of the gospel, it is also true that, as we pray, we are more conformed to the image of Jesus. We grow closer to our God. Prayer empowers us for holiness. And a holy life is a blessing to others: our friends, those we work with, our community, our spouse, our children, our parents, our church, etc.

From Capernaum to the Cross

Finally, what ultimately happened when Jesus prayed? He continued to get closer to the cross. For proclamation, particularly in the synagogues, would eventually get him murdered.

The last time Jesus is seen praying in Mark is in Gethsemane (Mark 14:32–42). He is seen praying in a garden. This is significant, because the wilderness of this sin cursed world will one day become a garden by the gracious gospel of God.

In Gethsemane, Jesus prayed for power to persevere. He needed perspective: “Not my will, but yours be done.” His prayers were answered. And it took him again to a wilderness, to a place outside the city called Golgotha.

There he was crucified, forsaken by God as he took the place of all sinners who would repent and call upon him as their Saviour and Lord. His final prayer came forth: “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” He then died. But then he would rise again, and ascend to

Praying in the Wilderness

Mark 1:35–39

Doug Van Meter

heaven. He saves sinners from there today. And a major reason for this is because, in Mark 1, he prayed.

Because of the cross of Jesus, you and I have the privilege to pray in our wilderness. So, let's do it. But when we do, know that such praying will lead you right to the cross. And this, as with Jesus, is painful. But like Jesus, the humiliation also leads to exaltation (see Phil 2:5–11 with Philippians 3:10–11).

What a privilege to know God. What a glorious grace to be conformed more and more like Jesus. And what a gift of grace to be invited to pray in the wilderness. Church – brothers and sisters – let us pray.

AMEN