

# When We Should Pray

Once again the example of Jesus is our perfect pattern. Although his whole life was one continual life of prayer, certain occasions are instructive for all true disciples.

1. *Every morning.* If we take the first chapter of Mark's gospel as depicting a typical day in the ministry of Jesus, we see the force of verse 35: "And in the morning, a great while before day, he rose and went into a lonely place, and there he prayed." In a few people, metabolism makes this virtually impossible, but the most important time of prayer for most Christians is in the morning, before breakfast. Tuning in to God from the start enables us both to commit the entire day to God, and to turn to him more readily during the day. In any war, every day begins with a careful check on communications, so that throughout the day orders can be passed on immediately and calls for help can be instantly heard. Without this, any army would be in chaos. The same principle applies in the army of Jesus Christ.

I have personally never found it easy getting up in the morning to pray! Every day is a real battle, but because it is worth winning, I have taken practical steps to "pommel my body and subdue it"! I use two alarm clocks to wake me up, since one on its own may fail to wake me. In the early days after my conversion, I used to have one alarm by my bed, and another cheap but very noisy alarm outside my door, set to go off ten minutes after the first. Because the second alarm would wake the whole household (and make me thoroughly unpopular), I had some motivation to get out of bed as soon as the first alarm had sounded. This scheme never failed!

2. *Before making important decisions.* The future of the Christian church rested on Jesus' choice of those first disciples. Although he probably knew in advance that one would betray him, another would deny him, and all would often fail him, making the right choices was crucial. Therefore "he went out to the mountain to pray; and all night he continued in prayer to God. And when it was day, he called his disciples, and chose from them twelve, whom he named apostles." Humanly speaking, they were an unlikely bunch; uneducated fishermen, patriotic freedom-fighters, a traitor (tax-collector), a traitor-to-be, ambitious, impulsive, pessimistic, fallible men. Yet these were to be the leaders of the Christian church when instructed in the faith and equipped by the power of the Spirit.

"If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God," wrote James. "But let him ask in faith, with no doubting..." Major decisions will nearly always call for special times of prayer.

3. *When under pressure.* When "great multitudes gathered to hear [Jesus] and to be healed of their infirmities," we read that "he withdrew to the wilderness and prayed." Most Christian work is draining. Beyond the usual physical and mental demands there rages a spiritual battle. When ministering to others, Jesus knew that power had gone out from him. Because he needed a constant renewal of body, mind, and spirit, he would regularly escape from people, both to relax and pray.

God once rebuked his people through the prophet Jeremiah with these words: "My people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns, that can hold no water." The Christian worker or the Christian church could be described in the same terms; all the right words and actions may be there, but the vital life-giving water of the Holy Spirit has dried up. Only the Spirit gives life and we need his living presence continuously flowing through us if we are to meet the spiritual thirst in others. "Beware of the barrenness of a busy life," warned Bishop Taylor Smith, about feverish activism of our Western society.

4. *When concerned about others.* "Simon, Simon," said Jesus tenderly on one occasion, "I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren." We so often criticize one another, and slander, attack, or judge. But if we turn our concern for other Christians

into prayer we will be far more effective as a church against the forces of darkness. A friend of mine said that the army of Christ must be the only army in the world where its soldiers constantly fight with each other. This is really doing the Devil's work for him. But when we turn criticism into prayer, we lift up the shield of faith on behalf of the one being attacked, and release the Holy Spirit's power to encourage or convict (as the need may be), and we keep the love of God flowing between us when the Devil is out to divide us.

5. *When tempted.* "Pray," said Jesus to his disciples when they faced severe testing, "that you may not enter into temptation." Even though tired and sleepy, the three disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane could have mutually encouraged one another in prayer. Sadly, they were soon overtaken by fear. When Jesus was arrested, they struck out in panic, then fled for their lives. Out of fear, Peter denied Jesus, and later they all huddled behind locked doors "for fear of the Jews."

In contrast, Jesus withstood the Tempter's deceit in the wilderness, and later in the garden through fasting and prayer. We cannot resist temptation in our own strength. Many times I have had to say to God, "Lord, I cannot do this thing by myself. I've tried, and failed. Please be my strength and shield in the midst of temptation." We might prefer some automatic security system to protect us from the Evil One, but God wants us to abide in his love, where we are safe from the ravages of sin.

6. *When in pain.* "Father, forgive them," prayed Jesus as the fierce nails were driven through his hands and feet; "they know not what they do." Consciously turning our thoughts towards God, and praying *for other people*, can wonderfully relieve our own pain. Even when seriously ill, I have spent much of the night in active prayer. It was the only thing that kept me sane, keeping me profoundly aware of God's never-failing presence and love in the midst of what seemed like a nightmare. I have also seen incredible spiritual beauty in the lives of those who, racked with constant pain, deliberately gave themselves to sacrificial, unselfish prayer. No one in his right mind will ask for seasons of pain, but God can use them to transform us into the likeness of Jesus, if we accept prayerfully his sovereign will for our lives.

7. *At the moment of death.* Death has been described as the old family servant who opens the door to welcome the children home. Sometimes death takes people by complete surprise, but if we know that we are being welcomed home, how good it will be to greet the one whom we are meeting face to face.

Ideally, of course, our whole life should become a life of prayer. Whether we wake, eat, walk, play, work, rest, chat or retire for the night, we should enjoy the Father's presence: rejoicing in him, praising him, thanking him, talking to him, listening to him, saying we're sorry, keeping silent. As we share our life with him, we allow him to share his life with us.

Intercessory prayer cards or calendars may be helpful for systematic prayer, but as servants, not masters. We must learn to be spontaneous in prayer as well. If I pray for people as I meet them in a street or in a home; or pray before answering the telephone or going to the front door, my attitude will be much more positive and sensitive. If all of us, as Christian disciples, could seriously pray—however briefly—for all whom we meet each day, think of the cumulative impact of the love of God on society!

David Watson, *Called & Committed*,

(Harold Shaw Publishers, Wheaton, IL; 1982), pp. 92-95