

Jesus Prayed, and the Disciples Slept
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“More praying will not come as a matter of Course. The campaign for the twentieth or thirtieth century will not help our praying, but hinder if we are not careful. Nothing but a specific effort from a praying leadership will avail. None but praying leaders can have praying followers. Praying apostles will beget praying saints. A praying pulpit will beget praying pews. We do greatly need somebody who can set the saints to this business of praying. We are a generation of non-praying saints. Non-praying saints are a beggarly gang of saints, who have neither the ardour nor the beauty, nor the power of saints. Who will restore this branch? The greatest will be of reformers and apostles, who can set the Church to praying.” -E M Bounds

Mark 14:32-42 *“And they come to a place of which the name is Gethsemane (oil press), and he says to his disciples, Sit here while I shall pray. And he takes with him Peter and James and John, and he began to be amazed and oppressed in spirit. And he says to them, My soul is full of grief even unto death; abide here and watch. And, going forward a little, he fell upon the earth; and he prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass away from him. And he said, Abba, Father, all things are possible to thee: take away this cup from me; but not what I will, but what thou wilt. And he comes and finds them sleeping. And he says to Peter, Simon, dost thou sleep? Hast thou not been able to watch one hour? Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh weak. And going away, he prayed again, saying the same thing. And returning, he found them again sleeping, for their eyes were heavy; and they knew not what they should answer him. And he comes the third time and says to them, Sleep on now, and take your rest. It is enough; the hour is come; behold, the Son of man is delivered up into the hands of sinners. Arise, let us go; behold, he that delivers me up has drawn nigh.” -Darby*

“They came to an area called Gethsemane. Jesus told his disciples, “Sit here while I pray.” He took Peter, James, and John with him. He plunged into a sinkhole of dreadful agony. He told them, “I feel bad enough right now to die. Stay here and keep vigil with me.” Going a little ahead, he fell to the ground and prayed for a way out: “Papa, Father, you can—can’t you?—get me out of this. Take this cup away from me. But please, not what I want—what do you want?” He came back and found them sound asleep. He said to Peter, “Simon, you went to sleep on me? Can’t you stick it out with me a single hour? Stay alert, be in prayer, so you don’t enter the danger zone without even knowing it. Don’t be naive. Part of you is eager, ready for anything in God; but another part is as lazy as an old dog sleeping by the fire.” He then went back and prayed the same prayer. Returning, he again found them sound asleep. They simply couldn’t keep their eyes open, and they didn’t have a plausible excuse. He came back a third time and said, “Are you going to sleep all night? No—you’ve slept long enough. Time’s up. The Son of Man is about to be betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up. Let’s get going. My betrayer has arrived.” -Message

Jesus leaves most of the disciples at the entrance to the Garden where He tells them to sit and wait while He and three others go on to a quiet spot to pray. Peter, James, and John are three very blessed men. For over three years they have occupied a special place in the heart and mind of Jesus Christ. They are often invited to accompany Him to events and locations where others are not privy. Jesus has observed something special or different in the lives of these men. Is it special in the sense that He sees their tremendous hunger and thirst for a closer walk with God into spiritual places? Does Jesus recognize the talent and leadership wrapped in their flesh? Has their boldness and easy grasp of the Lord’s mission caught His eye? Or could it be that Jesus saw in these men the need for more intense personal instruction, because without it their weak faith, ignorance, and poor self-discipline and control would be their undoing? There was much potential, but rough edges required hands-on shaping by the Potter. Maybe additional lessons in humility were required, for it is very humbling when your teacher catches you in the act of falling short of what is expected, especially on the heels of remarks like, *“I will never deny you.”* *“Even if everyone else leaves I will die for you.”* Pride is put in its proper place when after the fact the other disciples are laughing and joking about the night Jesus held a prayer meeting and Peter, James, and John fell fast asleep. *“See, you aren’t as great as you thought!”* Possibly a little of all of this is true.

“Stay here to watch and pray...but they slept.” Where would you have spent those dark chilly hours before dawn 2,000 years ago? Would you have been left at the entrance with most of the others? *“Thanks so much, guys, for walking with me this morning. Last night around the table was as special to me as it was to you, and the hike from town out to this beautiful garden spot was spectacular. To see the glory of the Father’s night sky, to experience the quiet as the city is asleep, and just the camaraderie shared among such close friends is indeed a blessing and memory never to be forgotten.”*

At the gate Jesus tells you to have a seat, maybe on the grass or a stone wall, while He and several others move on. So you sit and visit with the others, or after some time you close your eyes beneath the bright stars that speckle the Milky Way. And you dream.

You might have been included to proceed further. *“You four come on in. I have something more that I need you to do. You see, I really need to spend some intense and personal time with my Father, but I would so appreciate your encouragement and support. Please sit over here, and watch and pray. Pray for me, and the great decisions I must make. My heart is heavy with grief. I must do the will of my Father, and your prayers will comfort and encourage me.”*

So along with Peter, James, and John you find a comfortable spot to settle in for a bit while Jesus falls on His knees just out of earshot. And you begin to pray. But it is very early, and you’ve been up for almost 24 hours. The past days were a whirlwind of activity. There were the miles and miles of walking to get to Jerusalem before the Passover. Dusty roads, crowds of people, and the steady demands as Jesus taught and ministered to entire villages and towns along the way, not to mention the upper room preparations and stress associated with hanging out with the man who had recently entered the Temple courts and angered the officials while driving others out with a whip. This has not exactly been a vacation.

Did I mention it was very early? You pull your robe tight as a gentle breeze rustles the leaves and branches of the olive and sycamore trees, and you snuggle down. You begin to pray, but within two minutes your mind is thinking about a boat repair Peter had mentioned to you earlier. You catch yourself and resume praying for Jesus. Then you wonder, *“What could He possibly need prayer for? He is the miracle worker who can do anything. He can turn water to wine, calm raging storms, and feed thousands on just a few pieces of fish and bread. He can even raise the dead! He is the new King. How could I ever begin to pray for Him?”*

Your mind shifts gears again, but only briefly, because those last thoughts of exciting deeds fade away as sleep takes over. It is so relaxing and peaceful in the Garden.

An hour later you are shaken awake as Jesus kneels beside you. *“Couldn’t you stay awake and pray for just one hour? This is urgent. You must watch and pray lest you fall into temptation and sin.”*

You blush as you sheepishly respond, *“Yes, Lord. I’m sorry. I want so much to pray, but my eyes were heavy and I struggle to stay awake. This time we’ll do better.”*

Your little group recommits itself to watch and pray as you see Jesus return to the same grassy mound, fall on the ground, and begin again His private session with the Father. Yes, the spirit is willing but the flesh is so weak as you again fall into a deep slumber.

Time has passed. While your mind was far from Jesus’ Garden of Agony, He returns a second time to catch you no more faithful or obedient to His call than the last. Jesus’ words are not recorded this time, but we do read that the disciples were so embarrassed that they couldn’t even find words to answer Him. What could they say? When we are caught red handed it is useless to attempt excuses.

During His intense time with the Father Jesus struggled like never before. He had always understood His purpose and destiny, but with the hour upon Him His pain became immeasurably heavy. What would it be like for a sinless and perfect child who had always obeyed and honored His Father in every circumstance to come to the end of His days with the knowledge that all of the sins of a sick, rebellious, and perverse world would be placed squarely upon Him? By design, He would become the sacrifice for every evil thought and deed throughout history. The innocent One, without spot or blemish, would be cruelly tortured on a cross even as He continued to express His deep, unconditional, and forgiving love to His dying breath.

As Jesus prayed during the third vigil He prayed for Peter, James, and John. His heart cried out on behalf of the eight companions sleeping by the garden gate. With drops of blood oozing from the pores of His head and face He interceded on behalf of the billions of souls who would ever enter into the world. He prayed that dark morning for you and for me. Intense, focused, fervent prayer in a quiet garden of olive trees where the thousands of twinkling points of light in heaven above witnessed the event like the eyes of the heavenly host.

The third time Jesus walked softly through the tender grass to stand beside the restful trio. *“Enough now! Let’s head back toward the city.”* Heads bobbing, eyes sleepy, and bodies relaxed they came back to the real world as they stretched to their feet. Jesus’ great time of prayer was over, and He was ready once again to continue along the path of **“Not my will but Yours”**.

There was no more opportunity or call to **“watch and pray”** for the followers, and we can be absolutely certain that this failure to heed Jesus’ instruction in the peaceful Garden would haunt them over the course of the next three sleepless and desperate days.

The words of the Lord to “**watch and pray**” are meant for all believers, for all who have shared around the table of cup and bread, who have walked with Jesus as a friend and Master Teacher. If you have experienced Jesus first hand, you have already been told to “**watch and pray**”.

This watching and praying is as urgent for us as it was for Peter, James, and John. Unless we watch and are vigilant we cannot see to understand the Spirit of God at work through life’s events. We watch in order to know how to pray. We stay tuned into the things of God so that we fully believe, “**Not my will but Yours**”.

To watch is to be awake and on guard. Observe what is going on around you. Take it in with the eyes of Christ so your faith walk is not destroyed when some circumstance or temptation surprises you. See that a true connection is made between your experience and the teaching of Christ. Stay alert, don’t be caught unawares or off guard. The watchful one might not expect or understand every occurrence that comes along, but he will have no doubt regarding the One who holds tight his heart and soul.

Watch to pray. A little careful observing goes a long way in teaching us how we ought to pray. We see the smaller details so we might pray specifically and in harmony with the will of God. Watchfulness prevents us from running wildly and screaming, “*O, woe is me!*”. Consider again how watching and praying would have helped the disciples as they faced Jesus’ arrest, torture, death, and resurrection. Imagine how their leadership might have been different in the immediate aftermath of the crucifixion. How would Peter’s experience been different in the face of the painful hours just ahead had he been able to say with Jesus, “**Not my will but Yours**”? To watch and pray is to avoid panic and desperation.

It is very comforting to know that Jesus called the three to watchfulness and prayerfulness while they were in a quiet, comfortable, and peaceful place. That is so often available to us. Most of our time is spent in the quiet places, and no where should it be easier to prepare ourselves with watching and praying. However, it is a fact that while we live in the quiet place we are less apt to be vigilant and active in prayer. We too easily forget about the things Jesus is trying to tell us when we sense no great need to depend upon or walk with God. It is a general rule that we don’t begin to get serious about watching and praying until the storm comes and our quiet is turned to pain.

We are in a garden place today. In spite of the turmoil that is ripping so many countries and people this very moment, most of us are living in such calm that it is easy to fall asleep. But we mustn’t! Jesus knows what He’s talking about when He says, “**Watch and pray**”.

As a body of believers we should actively be encouraging one another to this end, and we should continually be committing ourselves to deepening prayer. Rather than depending upon our comfort and ease to hold us up we should be looking to our Father in heaven. Our wealth could be gone tomorrow, and then what? Our health could be gone tomorrow, and then what? Our family could be gone tomorrow, and then what? We must learn to be vigilant to life’s experiences so that our prayers teach us to look to the Lord and rest in His will and not ours.

And remember that His will most often looks nothing like our own. What Jesus had in mind in the Garden, what He would have chosen apart from watching and praying to His Father would have looked quite differently from the will of God. He longed for another cup. He envisioned something besides taking on the sins of the world and dying a most grisly death. The pressure and anxiety of that morning was nothing short of overwhelming, as evidenced by the sweating of blood.

But Jesus knew what it was to watch and pray, and when He finally stood up He knew for sure that He was going to live in the center of God’s will rather than His own. No matter the consequence, He would meet the next sunrise focused and committed to the purposes of God. The disciples left that scene quite the opposite. When the storm did come with the arrival and betrayal of Judas they scattered in fear.

Watching and praying is reflected in our personal time with God. It has to do with how we pray. It is the difference between a lazy shotgun prayer, “*God bless everyone*”, and specific determined prayers that take an interest in pleasing and honoring God. We filter our thoughts, decisions, and actions through watching and praying. Sleep, and we are preparing ourselves to be run over by circumstances and fall to temptation.

Watching and praying is reflected in our corporate time as a body in Christ. How are we experiencing prayer in worship? How are we teaching one another to pray? How many of us can truly admit that we know how to pray? How is prayer applied when making decisions about church life or dealing with troubling and difficult circumstances? Have you ever witnessed the church at its worst while arguing for hours but praying for only seconds?

Interestingly, even when we gather for “prayer meeting” in the “House of Prayer” there is very little real praying taking place. Minds wander, very few actually participate, and when measured we will find any number of other things to occupy our time besides talking to God and listening to His response. Without blinking an eye we’d much rather fill the time with “good things” at the expense of the best. By our example we have convinced one another and taught our children that prayer is boring, very difficult, and in the end has little effect over the management of real day-to-day church business. But God’s opinion of the place of prayer is much different. **“Watch and pray, lest you fall into temptation”.**

I would challenge you to an exciting and rewarding experiment. Begin to purposefully watch and pray. At home keep an active prayer list handy. When asked to pray about something, do so immediately. Don’t walk away saying, *“I’ll keep you in prayer”* only to forget about it. Quietly pray in the moment, or if appropriate, offer the prayer verbally when the request is made known.

At church develop prayer warriors, and explore the depth of Christian prayer by allowing it to become a true part of worship rather than a ritual filler. Allow prayer meeting to become a time to meet to pray where small groups break off to pray for specific prayer and praise needs. Vary the format so it is always exciting and challenging. Teach others to pray. Apply the Bible models to prayer. Jesus began His earthly ministry with prayer following His baptism and concluded it standing in the garden we’ve read about today, arms raised, as He blessed the disciples seconds before He disappeared into the clouds.

Watch and pray in the community. Form weekly home prayer fellowships that consistently gather for a few minutes to do nothing but watch and pray over specific items distributed beforehand to the prayer hosts. These **“Points of Light”** covenant to meet for about 40 minutes every week at their individual scheduled time and place to pray. No food, no gossip, no chasing rabbits, no empty moments. You gather to pray specifically for those important matters written out before you. And you take time later when the congregation meets to report the joys and blessings of such valuable time with God.

Prepare and post maps throughout the church of locations, schedules, and host information of the **“Points of Light”**. Then stick to it.

Explore the relationship of prayer and praise, scripture and prayer, healing and prayer, ministry and prayer, evangelism and prayer, confession and prayer, spirituality and prayer, obedience and prayer, etc. Be active and real each time you pray.

Set aside time as a congregation to share with one another God’s response to your prayers. What have you learned? What barriers or sin has been stripped away due to your time with God? What new questions do you have? How is God’s will taking on a whole new meaning in your personal and corporate life?

Close your eyes. Hear Jesus speak to you as you walk with Him to the Garden. He stops, turns to you, and very personally He says, *“My dear child, you sit here to watch and pray while I go over there for a little while”*. Then you respond in a way that gives Him great pleasure as He returns to find you not asleep but praying!

Mark 13:30-37 “Verily I say unto you, This generation shall in no wise pass away, till all these things take place. 31 The heaven and the earth shall pass away, but my words shall in no wise pass away. 32 But of that day or of that hour no one knows, neither the angels who are in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father. 33 Take heed, watch and pray, for ye do not know when the time is: 34 it is as a man gone out of the country, having left his house and given to his bondmen the authority, and to each one his work, and commanded the doorkeeper that he should watch. 35 Watch therefore, for ye do not know when the master of the house comes: evening, or midnight, or cock-crow, or morning; 36 lest coming suddenly he find you sleeping. 37 But what I say to you, I say to all, Watch.” -Darby

These verses in chapter 13 are a call to the doorkeeper to be alert, to be prayerfully watchful for the day that the Master will return. What a terrible thing for the Master to return and find the one in charge of the house to be asleep. Can this one be trusted? How often does he sleep on the job? What else has he missed or slept through?

“The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much” is a well-known verse, but greatly forgotten in our busy day to day routine. In the late 19th century E. M. Bounds penned the following in his book “Purpose In Prayer.” Does it have a familiar ring?

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“More praying will not come as a matter of Course. The campaign for the twentieth or thirtieth century will not help our praying, but hinder if we are not careful. Nothing but a specific effort from a praying leadership will avail. None but praying leaders can have praying followers. Praying apostles will beget praying saints. A praying pulpit will beget praying pews. We do greatly need somebody who can set the saints to this business of praying. We are a generation of non-praying saints. Non-praying saints are a beggarly gang of saints, who have neither the ardour nor the beauty, nor the power of saints. Who will restore this branch? The greatest will be of reformers and apostles, who can set the Church to praying.

“Holy men have, in the past, changed the whole force of affairs, revolutionized character and country by prayer. And such achievements are still possible to us. The power is only wanting to be used. Prayer is but the expression of faith. “Time would fail to tell of the mighty things wrought by prayer, for by it holy ones have “subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to fight the armies of the aliens, women received their dead raised to life. Prayer honours God; it dishonours self. It is man’s plea of weakness, ignorance, want. A plea which heaven cannot disregard. God delights to have us pray.

“Prayer is not the foe to work, it does not paralyse activity. It works mightily; prayer itself is the greatest work. It springs activity, stimulates desire and effort. Prayer is not an opiate but a tonic, it does not lull to sleep but arouses anew for action. The lazy man does not, will not, cannot pray, for prayer demands energy. Paul calls it a striving, an agony. With Jacob it was a wrestling; with the Syrophenician women it was a struggle which called into play all the higher qualities of the soul, and which demanded great force to meet.

“The closet is not an asylum for the indolent and worthless Christian. It is not a nursery where none but babes belong. It is the battlefield of the Church; its citadel; the scene of heroic and unearthly conflicts. The closet is the base of supplies for the Christian and the Church. Cut off from it there is nothing left but retreat and disaster. The energy for work, the mastery over self, the deliverance from fear, all spiritual results and graces, are much advanced by prayer. The difference between the strength, the experience, the holiness of Christians is found in the contrast in their praying.

“Few, short, feeble prayers, always betoken a low spiritual condition. Men ought to pray much and apply themselves to it with energy and perseverance. Eminent Christians have been eminent in prayer. The deep things of God are learned nowhere else. Great things for God are done by great prayers. He who prays much, studies much, loves much, works much, does much for God and humanity. The execution of the Gospel, the vigour of faith, the maturity and excellence of spiritual graces wait on prayer.”

O God, may we quiet ourselves to hear Your call to pray; may we become righteous people fervently raising unselfish petitions to Your Holy throne.