

Praying in a Crisis



How do we lift our darkest, most depressed, most lonely moments up to God? How can we pray when we are most deeply alone, helpless, and our whole world seems to be collapsing?

We can learn from Jesus and how he prayed the night before his death in the Garden of Gethsemane, in his darkest hour: It was late at night; he had just had his last meal with his closest friends, and he had one hour to prepare to face his death. His humanity breaks through and Jesus finds himself prostrate on the ground, begging for escape. Here's how the Gospels describe it:

Jesus withdrew from his disciples, about a stone's throw away, and threw himself to the ground and prayed. "Abba, Father, all things are possible for you, if you are willing, take this cup away from me. Nevertheless, let your will be done, not mine." And he came back and found his disciples sleeping. So he withdrew again and in anguish prayed even more earnestly, and his sweat fell to the ground like great drops of blood. When he rose from prayer he went to the disciples and found them sleeping for sheer grief. And he said to them, "Why are you asleep? Get up and pray not to be put to the test." And he prayed a third time, and an angel came and strengthened him, and he rose to face with strength what lay before him.

This prayer by Jesus in Gethsemane can serve as a model for how we can pray when we're in crisis. Looking at the prayer, we can highlight seven elements, each of which has something to teach us in terms of how to pray in our darkest times:

1. The prayer issues forth from his loneliness: The Gospels highlight this, both in terms of telling us that the prayer takes place in a garden (the archetypal place for love) and in that Jesus is "a stone's throw away" from his loved ones who cannot be present to what he is undergoing. In our deepest crises, we are always painfully alone, a stone's throw away from others. Deep prayer should issue from that place.
2. The prayer is one of great familiarity: He begins the prayer by calling his father "Abba", the most familiar term possible, the phrase that a young child would use sitting on his or her father's lap. In our darkest hours, we must be most familiar with God.
3. The prayer is one of complete honesty: Classically prayer is defined as "lifting mind and heart to God". Jesus does this here, radically, in searing honesty. He asks God to take the suffering away, to give him escape. His humanity cringes before duty and he asks for escape. That's honest prayer, true prayer.
4. The prayer is one of utter helplessness: He falls to the ground, prostrate, with no illusions about his own strength. His prayer contains the petition that if God is to do this through him, God needs to provide the strength for it.
5. The prayer is one of openness, despite personal resistance: Even as he cringes before what he is being asked to undergo and asks for escape, he still gives God the radical permission to enter his freedom. His prayer opens him to God's will, if that is what's ultimately being asked of him.
6. The prayer is one of repetition: He repeats the prayer several times, each time more earnestly, sweating blood, not just once, but several times over.
7. The prayer is one of transformation: Eventually an angel (divine strength) comes and fortifies him and he gives himself over to what he is being asked to undergo on the basis of a new strength that comes from beyond him. But that strength can only flow into him after he has, through helplessness, let go of his own strength. It is only after the desert has done its work on us that we are open to let God's strength flow into us.

In his book, *Stride Towards Freedom*, Martin Luther King recounts how one night, after receiving a death threat, he panicked, gave into fear, and, not unlike Jesus in Gethsemane, literally collapsed to the floor in fear, loneliness, helplessness - and prayer. He confessed that his prayer that night was mostly a plea to God to let him find an honorable means of escape, but God asked something else of him. Here are his final words to God in that prayer:

"But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone." Then he adds: "At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced Him before." An angel found him.

When we pray honestly, whatever our pain, an angel of God will always find us.

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