

Jesus and Prayer in Luke: God Never does Nothing

Turn to Luke 3 please. Luke 3. Most days I read a few pages from the OT and a few pages from the NT. Since July I've been reading Genesis in the OT, as you might expect, and I've been reading Luke from the NT.

Luke's Gospel has more about prayer than the other Gospels, and I already knew that. But by the time I got to the end of Luke, this topic was calling me, so I spent some time re-reading the prayer parts. And this sermon is where that took me.

God never just says "no." We all have prayed for things that did not happen. I assume that, and will not try to change your mind. God did not do what we asked for, plain and simple. I've got many stories like that, as do you. Luke is convinced, and Jesus in Luke is convinced, that when we pray, God always responds with something good from him.

Prayer after Baptism Lk 3:21-22

When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

As Jesus was praying, God acted, and impressively, too. Heaven opened, the Holy Spirit descended, and the Father spoke out loud. What was Jesus praying? We don't know. Did God give Jesus what he was asking for? Probably, but we don't know that.

It's not important to tell us that. We don't need to know. What we do need to know is that Jesus was praying, and *while* he was praying, God responded like this. God acted. That much is clear, and that's what we should see.

Prayer and Ministry: Three Things on the Move Lk 5:15-16

Yet the news about Jesus spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.

Three kinds of motion keep happening. One, news about Jesus keeps going out. Two, crowds of people keep gather to hear his teaching, and be healed of diseases. Three, Jesus often leaves to lonely places so he could pray. News goes out, people come in, Jesus often leaves to pray.

What's he asking for? Don't know. Why does he keep leaving to pray? We don't know. The teaching and the healing are going well, there does not seem to be any problem there. His life sounds very full, the prayer must be restful, but he's not leaving to rest. He's leaving to pray. It does not seem to be on a schedule, he's not doing this twice a day, or at a certain time.

He just regularly needs to be in prayer, like eating or sleeping, and it seems he can feel it, and he leaves successful ministry behind to pray, he comes back and does more teaching and healing.

Prayer all Night 6:12-13

One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles.

He spent the night praying to God. Again, it does not say what he asked. Notice that? We assume he's asking for wisdom. Is this the time to choose messengers? Should he choose 12? That's a loaded number. Who should he choose? Maybe the Father wants ones Jesus doesn't want.

Whatever Jesus is doing there, he's not having an easy time. He's not getting answers quickly, and he's not enjoying perfect peace, or he'd just sleep. He might not even have all this sorted out by the morning, but it is time to start, so he does, trusting God.

We don't know what he prayed. It is not important. He needed something from God. There was a big day coming up, and he spent the night before praying to God. He did not quickly get whatever he thought he needed. He spent the night praying to God, and the day went as it should.

Prayer, the Christ, Death and Resurrection Lk 9:18-22

Once when Jesus was praying in private and his disciples were with him, he asked them, "Who do the crowds say I am?" (9:18)

In Gethsemane, we read that Jesus was with just his disciples, and he separated himself about a stone's throw to pray alone. So when it says here that Jesus was praying in private and his disciples were with him, we should picture something like that.

So Jesus was praying, and then he asked the disciples, "who do the crowds say I am?" Then he asked them, "who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "you are the Christ of God." Then Jesus told them that he must suffer many things, and be killed, and raised the third day.

We do not know what Jesus was praying about. We do know that right after the prayer, Jesus took things up a notch with the disciples, a big step up in their understanding of him. He's the Christ, and he's going to suffer much, be rejected, then die, and be raised the third day.

Was Jesus asking about this in his prayer? We don't know. Did God tell him, "it's time to take this to the next level?" We don't know. But we do know that he was praying, and that important things happened after he prayed. After he prays, he always serves God. That's important. Let's think about what we've read. Jesus prays often. Once we heard about a whole night in prayer, but that was unusual.

How long he prayed does not matter, what he prayed does not matter. He was in prayer, regularly. It was not a response to something hard in his life. We never get that sense.

His prayer led to serving God. His prayers were not about good things happening to him. His enemies got stronger, and his disciples were just as dull. The stories always join his prayers to his service for God. He prayed so that he could serve. Past that, what he prayed has not mattered. That he was in prayer to God mattered a great deal. He prayed, then he served God.

Tell us What you Pray Lk 11:1-13

We will look more carefully at these 13 verses.

One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples."

John the Baptist also prayed a lot. When John's disciples asked him how they should pray, they were asking John to tell them how he prayed, so they could pray as John prayed. John would of course have taught his disciples the kind of praying he thought was important.

So one time when Jesus finished praying, his disciples wanted him to teach them about praying, they meant, "Tell us what you were praying over there, so we know how we should pray." Apparently Jesus did not rush into teaching that. The thing here, though, is that we should assume this prayer, the Lord's Prayer, was the normal way Jesus himself prayed.

Pray Like This Lk 11:2-4

For brevity, I will shorten this to what seem to me the basics of the Lord's Prayer. *Jesus said to them, "When you pray, say: 'Father, your name, your kingdom, your will. To serve you, I need food, I need forgiveness, I need help forgiving others, I need rescue from evil. Amen.'*

The prayer starts with remarkable submission. When I pray, I find myself saying, "Father, *my* kingdom is in trouble, so would you please do *my* will?" Jesus said we should begin prayer this way: "Father, your name, your kingdom, your will, not mine but yours."

How much of Jesus' praying, do you think, was Jesus trying to submit again, trying to make this about his Father, not himself? Maybe the first half of his praying was to sort that out again?

Hebrews says that Jesus was made in every respect as we are, and that he was tempted in every respect as we are, and that he knows about weakness in the face of temptation, and has great sympathy for our struggles with temptation. We should assume Jesus often had great difficulty saying, "Father, your name, your kingdom, your will.

First, submission, and then, “To serve you, Father, I need food, I need forgiveness (that Jesus did not need), I need help forgiving others (that Jesus certainly needed), rescue me from evil (that also Jesus certainly needed).

Friend at Midnight – Not Persistence Lk 11:5-8

This story teaches that the friend would never say “no.” Jesus begins the story “who of you?” Many translations mess up the beginning of the story, and that changes it too much. In short, the parable goes like this: “Which of you would go ask your friend for bread in the middle of the night, and the friend would say ‘no?’” The answer, “No friend would do that, of course.”

“No one in bed would do that to their friend. Even if your friend was grumpy, he’d of course get up and give you what you need.” “Well then,” says Jesus, “if your friend in bed would give you bread in the middle of the night, how much more will God give you what you need!” And the application comes in the next section ...

God Never says “No” Lk 11:9-13

“So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. This is what the “Friend at Midnight” story taught about God: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.

Then Jesus says that again, in different words: *For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.*

Jesus has said the same thing six times: (1) Ask and it will be given to you; (2) seek and you will find; (3) knock and the door will be opened to you. (4) Everyone who asks receives; (5) the one who seeks finds; and (6) to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. Is this complicated?

Then he says more of the same: *“Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”*

Does God ever just say “no, I won’t do that for you”? No. That’s never the whole story. Even when we’re asking for the wrong thing, we never walk away with nothing. When we pray, he gives something good. That’s why Jesus keeps going back. He never comes away with nothing.

If a grumpy friend at midnight will give, if evil parents give good things to their children, how much more will God be generous with us? So, if he’s not giving us what we want, what is he giving us? What is the Father giving? Can you guess? We just read the answer. Jesus told us.

How much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?

People, I don't understand prayer. Don't ask me, because I can't answer. I'm just trying to listen to this Scripture. Jesus began this teaching with the Lord's Prayer, and ended with the Father generously giving the Holy Spirit. What if the answer to the Lord's Prayer is the Holy Spirit? What if we're really asking for the Holy Spirit, just didn't know that?

What if, when we want our troubles to go away, we pray and pray, and troubles stay, and God is not answering, what if what God thinks, "what this child really needs is more of the Holy Spirit, so they can continue on." It's probably not that simple, but this section sounds like that to me.

Persistent Prayer. There is a notion around that if we really want something from God, if we ask often enough, and if we really mean it, then eventually we'll get it. Folks, that is pagan teaching, it is a big problem. There is nothing in this or anywhere that says any such thing.

God is unbelievably generous, that's the whole point of 11:9-12. In Matthew 6, Jesus says, "do not think you will be heard for your many words. Your Father in heaven knows what you need before you ask. He does not need persuading." God can be served and trusted, but not managed.

It sounds like every time we pray, no matter what we ask for, God sends his Spirit to help us and build us up, and encourage us. Perhaps that's why Jesus kept leaving to pray. What did that feel like? How did Jesus know? All we know is that he kept trusting his Father, and serving him.

Always Pray and Don't Give Up, When I Return, Will there be Faith on Earth? Lk 18:1,8b

Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.

Then he told the story about the persistent widow and the unjust judge. God is not like the grumpy friend at midnight who would say 'no' and God is not like the unjust judge. God always says yes, and quickly. The parable ends with this surprising line from Jesus:

But, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?

Let's put these two lines together, the line that began that parable and the line that ends it.
*Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up...
When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?*

Let's read that again: *Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up... When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?*

What does "giving up" mean? It does not mean, "give up asking and asking for that nice thing." It does not mean anything like that. Giving up means giving up on faith and giving up on serving God. *Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up, because if they give up on prayer, their faith will not last.*

What should his disciples pray for exactly? In that opening line of the parable, that doesn't matter. In the opening line, God is not as concerned about *what* we pray for as that we *continue* to pray, *don't give up* on prayer. Praying the Lord's Prayer would be good.

What we absolutely must not do is quit praying. Being in prayer is how we keep our faith and keep serving God. Often in Luke, what we pray for exactly seems not to be the crucial thing. Jesus prayed much, but usually we are not told what he prayed, only that he was praying.

So, people, be in prayer. Don't give up on prayer. How that will look exactly for each of us does not matter to Jesus. No rules are given. If I want to keep my faith and live faithfully, I will find a way to pray. We usually don't know what Jesus prayed, but the result was always that he served God in some way, he kept being faithful to God.

When we pray, God never does nothing. He may not give us what we ask, but he never just says "no." I believe that in many cases, when we are not getting what we asked for, God is giving the Holy Spirit to encourage and comfort us, to strengthen us and give us endurance to stay faithful. God thinks that's the best thing He could give children he loves. Amen.

PRAYER: O God, you have told us today, "ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you, everyone who asks receives, the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened." If a rudely awakened friend will give, O God, how much more will you? If evil parents like us give good things to our children, how much more will you? If a terrible judge can be moved to help, how much more quickly will you be moved to help? You have encouraged us with these words.

We can tell, God, that you fear we will stop praying. You know confused and disappointed we sometimes feel about prayer. We wonder why we bother. But Our Lord has taught us today. Thank you for all the prayers we've prayed that you answered with something better than what we asked for, you've given us the Holy Spirit. Thank you that when we pray, you never just say no, you never do nothing, and we never walk away empty. Thank you for the Holy Spirit. Amen.

(response time)

BENEDICTION: In answer to our prayers, may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, may that God, in answer to our prayers, equip us with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what pleases him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord. You are dismissed.