

PRAYER'S POSSIBILITIES

by Ray C. Stedman

Suppose you knew that tomorrow, or the day following, your life would be ended and you were trying to sum up for someone what your life meant, what you felt were the abiding values of your life. What would you say?

This is the circumstance in which we find Jesus in the 17th chapter of John. In the 13th chapter, which introduces the *Upper Room Discourse*, John says:

Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, rose from supper, laid aside his garments, and girded himself with a towel. Then he poured water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which he was girded. (John 13:3-5 {RSV})

Following that, Jesus uttered the amazing, astonishing words which we call the *Upper Room Discourse*. When he turns to prayer at the close of this discourse, our Lord reviews his life to the Father, a review of thirty-three years of ministry on earth: those silent years in Nazareth and those action-packed years in his public ministry when he went up and down the hills of Judea and Galilee, preaching and healing and ministering to all the multitudes that followed him. As we read these words, especially Verses 4-8, we are privileged to listen in as he appraises his own life. He is gathering all these thirty-three years into three tremendous statements, which constitute his own evaluation of the greatest life that was ever lived:

The first thing he points out of the Father is that he accomplished a work which glorifies.

"I glorified thee on earth, having accomplished the work which thou gavest me to do; and now, Father, glorify thou me in thy own presence with the glory which I had with thee before the world was made." {John 17:4-5 RSV}

This prayer was prayed before the cross, but, in its scope, it reaches beyond and includes the cross. Our Lord knew where he was going, he knew what he would be doing in the next few hours and what would be accomplished, and in view of this he says, "I have finished the work which you gave me to do." That work included more than the cross. It encompassed his ministry of healing and mercy, and, as I have suggested, even those thirty silent years back in Nazareth, of which we know so little. They were all part of his life, his work, which the Father had given him to do. The key to the meaning of this is found in Verse 5, "Now, Father, glorify thou me in thine own presence [where he was going] with the glory which I had with thee before the world was made."

No other human lips could utter those words. None of us can look back to a time when we were with the Father before the world was made, but here was one who could. And in saying this, he is asking to be restored to the glory that is properly his. If there is any verse in the Bible which single-handedly, standing by itself, unmistakably reflects the Deity of Jesus Christ, it is this verse. For here he is asking for the glory which was the Father's glory as well. Isaiah reminds us that God does not share his glory with anyone less than himself. "My glory," he says, "will I not give to another," {Isa 48:11 RSV}. But here is one who shared the Father's glory before the world was made and who recognizes that it was properly his. It would be interesting to dwell upon the glory as to what it was and how it was that he could recall that glory as a man waking here on the earth, but this is not the point that our Lord is making. He brings this in to indicate to us the character of his work while he was here. He is suggesting that his work was characterized by a continual self-emptying, that is, a laying aside of glory. Now that he has reached the end, he is ready to resume the glory which was properly his, but he is thinking back over thirty-three years of his life and recognizing that all during that time he had voluntarily surrendered his right to be worshipped, his right to the glory that belonged to God.

This reminds us of those words of Paul's in Philippians 2: "He who was in the form of God," he said, "thought it not a thing to be held on to at all costs, but humbled himself, emptied himself ["made himself of no reputation," the King James version says] and was made in the likeness of men," {cf, Phil 2:6-7 RSV}. Jesus is pointing out that the work that glorified the Father was essentially one of self-emptying. That is what glorified God!

We are so confused about this. We think that God is interested in our activity, that there are certain religious pursuits which we can perform which God will be pleased with no matter in what frame of mind we do them. That is why we sometimes drag ourselves out to church week after week when we actually have little interest in attending church -- because we think that attending church is what God wants. Or we give for some missionary cause because we think this is what God is after. How little we understand God!

It is not activity that he desires. It was not merely that which Jesus did which glorified the Father. It was not his ministry of mercy and good works. Others have done similar things. But it was the fact that throughout his life he had a heart that was ready to obey, an ear that was ready to hear, a will that was ready to be subject to the Father. It was his willingness to be always available, to forever be giving of himself, that glorified God.

There was that incident at the baptism of John when the heavens opened and the voice of the Father came in thunderous tones: "This is my beloved Son in whom I find all my delight," {cf, Matt 3:17}. He had not done anything yet for that was the beginning of his ministry; but for thirty years, as in all his ministry, he manifested a heart that was ready to obey. That is what glorifies God.

There are a great many books written about the so-called "cost of discipleship." They declare, in one way or another, that in order to have power with God we must pay a high price. In various ways they state that to become a victorious Christian, an effective Christian, requires a difficult and demanding discipline. In all honesty, and I hope you will understand what I have to say on this, I must say that I am not impressed with this type of literature at all. It is a totally negative approach. We have gotten the cart before the horse. Now let me explain what I mean. I do not mean that such an approach is untrue, for the fact is that obedience to God does mean saying "No" to a lot of other things. You cannot say "Yes" to the Spirit of God without, at the same time, saying "No" to many other things: it is simply inherent in the process of decision. Therefore, I do not mean that power with God and living for the glory of God does not indeed cost us certain fancied pleasures and relationships which perhaps we want to hold onto. But the cost of discipleship is not the cost that really ought to concern us. The truly costly thing is the cost of disobedience! There is where the emphasis should be put. I would love to see a book on the cost of rebellion in the Christian life.

How well we know that cost. What a tremendous toll our rebelliousness, our disobedience, our unwillingness to give of ourselves, takes in our lives in terms of frustrated, restless spirits, the shameful, degrading acts that we hope nobody discovers, the skeletons that rattle around in our closets for years, the irritated, vexatious dispositions that keep us in a nervous frenzy all the time, the weak, spineless, crowd-following ways that we frequently exhibit, the self-righteous, smug, religiosity which we call Christianity that is a stench in the nostrils of the world and an offense unto God and men. Where do these things come from? Are they not the terrible price that we pay for a rebellious spirit, for an unwillingness to yield ourselves to the Lordship of Christ? We are not our own, we say, but we still cling to the right to run our own lives and make our own decisions, to choose our own pleasures and to go where we will and do what we want, and we cover it over with reserved, pious religiosity! We say we want to do God's will -- as long as it is what we want to do. At the center of our lives Self is still king, and that is the problem. Our own glory is in view. We still want what we want and we are not willing as Jesus was, to walk in glad obedience. But this is what glorifies the Father.

Let us not talk about living to the glory of God while our own lives are still filled with so much of self-centeredness and selfishness. Do you realize that every truly great Christian who has ever lived has found that the glory of an obedient life, a life that is ready to fling itself away for the cause of Christ, far outweighs the piddling cost of giving up a few selfish desires for Christ's sake? Do not talk about the cost of discipleship, it is the cost of rebellion that we ought to be concerned about. C. T. Studd, who gave away his fortune and went out into the heart of Africa, said, "If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, then there is no sacrifice too great for me to make for him." David Livingston said, "I have resolved not to count anything I own of any value, save as it relates to the advance of the Kingdom of God." Was this sacrifice? They would not call it that.

Those who have seen the glory of God in an obedient heart never speak of sacrifice. They never talk about what they have given up, because what they have gotten is of such tremendous, surpassing value. Paul could say, "Whatsoever things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ's sake," {cf, Phil 3:7}. Nothing could compare with what Christ could give to him.

This last week they buried a man on a hillside in Korea, a man who was for many years a simple farmer in Oregon. On a trip to the Orient he saw the needs of the desolate, destitute orphans of Korea, those thousands of young children begotten by American soldiers sent to that land. This man saw them as every other tourist who goes to Korea sees them, out in the streets, penniless, begging, no one to care for them. But, unlike the other tourists, he did not go on to some other country and forget what he saw. He came back home with his heart burdened and began a ministry of lining up homes in America for Korean orphans. He had had one heart attack already and had been forewarned by his doctor he must not over-exert, but he forgot that, he forgot himself, he gave himself without stint. This week he had another heart attack and they buried him out there in Korea, but the story of his work appeared in every English language newspaper in the world, for here was a man who had lost himself that he might glorify God. His name was Harry Holt. And as Jesus is talking to the Father, he puts his finger right on the thing that glorifies God, a life of self-giving love.

What are you giving yourself to? That is the question I have been asking my heart this week. Whom am I helping?

Then Jesus reveals the second thing that marks his life:

"I have manifested thy name to the men whom thou gavest me out of the world; thine they were, and thou gavest them to me, and they have kept thy word." {John 17:6 RSV}

That is an amazing statement, "They have kept thy word." He says, "I have manifested a name that empowers men to keep God's word." There is a relationship between these two. What was the result in the disciples' lives when the name of God became manifest? "They kept thy word." Do we not well realize that ignorance of the right is seldom our problem? It is not that we do not know what God wants us to do. Is it not the truth that the problem is we do not want to do it? We know what it is, be we do not want to do it. In fact, in some way strange to us, we cannot do it, our wills are paralyzed. We may want to but we cannot.

I will never forget, years ago, a young man with agony in his eyes laying hold of my arm and saying to me, "What do you do when you know something is wrong and you don't want to do it, but even while you are promising that you won't do it you know that you are going to do it again? What do you do then?" The only answer I have found to that question is to understand and to act on what God is willing to be to us. In other words, to understand the character of God, to lay hold of his name, that is the power of human life, and the only power that works.

A name stands for the total character and resources of an individual. My name is all that I am, your name is all that you are. Whatever you are, that is what your name means to others. When my wife took my name in marriage, she literally took me for all I had. (It wasn't much! As a matter of fact, we had to cash her bonds to get home from the honeymoon.) But whenever I sign my name, "Ray C. Stedman," the whole Stedman fortune, all thirty-five dollars of it, is laid on the line.

Now the work of Jesus Christ during those thirty-three years of his life was to unveil to us the total resources of the Father, to manifest his name, that we might discover what a tremendously, unending resource we have in God, that we can never get to the bottom of the barrel. Failure to realize this is exactly where our problem of weakness lies.

I see Christians struggling, seemingly trying to act by faith and yet all the time sabotaging their efforts by a flat refusal to believe that God is what he says he is. It is amazing to me how easily we believe the Satanic lies about God. We do not believe that he is what he says he is. We believe, essentially, that God is utterly faithless, that he will not do what he says he will do. When I talk with people and they tell me what their troubles are, I try to give them advice and counsel. Usually they will say they've tried that. So I suggest something else, and they've tried that, and, finally, though they never say this, the only conclusion left to draw

is that God is a failure, that he does not come through. They have done everything required, but God does not act. He is capricious, a respecter of persons. He will do things for someone else but he won't do it for them. When we believe that kind of lie we sabotage every effort that God is making to bring us out into victory.

God is faithful. How many times does the Scripture say that? "God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted above that which you are able to bear, but will with the temptation, make a way of escape that you may be able to bear it," {cf, 1 Cor 10:13}. "God is faithful, who has called you into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord," {cf, 1 Cor 1:9}. The whole work of Jesus Christ is to show us the faithfulness of God. What a glory in his life is manifested as we see how he rested on God's faithfulness. He was not anxious, he was not troubled, he was not disturbed when the clouds of oppression and persecution began to hang heavy over him, and resistance to his message stiffened on every side, and death threats began to come. He was not troubled, for he rested on the faithful name of God. The Psalmist says,

**The name of the Lord is a strong tower;
the righteous runneth into it, and is safe. (Prov 18:10 {KJV})**

Have you discovered that yet?

There is yet a third thing Jesus said characterized his life.

**"for I have given them the words which thou gavest me, and they have received them and know in truth that I come from thee; and they have believed that thou didst send me."
{John 17:8 RSV}**

What made these Jewish disciples, who were mortally afraid of idolatry, believe that this man with whom they had lived, eaten, slept, with whom they had walked the roads of Galilee and Judea had seen in all the weakness of his human life, had followed for three and a half years -- what made them believe that this man, in all his humanity, was also Incarnate God, sent of the Father? John could write:

**In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
{John 1:1}**

How did he learn that?

- Was it Jesus' miracles that convinced him? No, his miracles never convinced anyone of his deity. They convinced them of his Messiahship; that is what they were designed to do.
- Was it then the power that he exercised over men? No, there have been evil men that have exercised tremendous power over the minds and hearts of men. It wasn't that.
- What was it? It was his words!

The words of Jesus searched their hearts, and opened their eyes, and dispelled their doubts, and set afire their lives. They knew that when they took these words seriously, things happened to them that only God could do. Gradually, through the course of three and a half years, as they listened to those compelling, magnetic words, there was born in their hearts the faith that here was One who came from God. "They have received them and know in truth that I come from thee; and they have believed that thou didst send me."

These words still have that power today.

Are you troubled by doubts as to your Christian faith? It would not be surprising if many of you were troubled with doubts in these days when there is so great an attack against the foundations of faith. If you are troubled with doubts, may I suggest something? Start reading the words of Jesus, and take them seriously. Don't just read them, take them as a revelation of basic, underlying truth. Take them seriously. You won't have read far before you will have discovered so much understanding of life and experience that you cannot help but believe that these words are indeed the words of God.

What pitiful groping exists among Christians today! I am troubled by the way young theologians, new graduates of seminaries, frankly admit that they are better acquainted with the writings of Tillich, Barth and Bultmann than they are with the writings of Moses and Paul. No wonder they have weak foundations for their faith. Nothing convinces like the matchless Word of God.

Here are the three things that Jesus came to do. He said: "I came to give myself in a self-emptying ministry; I came to manifest an all-empowering Name by which anything that needs to be done may be done; and I came to speak compelling words that would awaken faith in men's hearts and cause them to believe." John said at the beginning of this discourse that Jesus knew that the Father had given all things into his hands. He knew that he had come from God, and he knew that he was going to God, and in between lay those thirty-three years that the world can never escape, the impact of which he is gathering up in these three brief phrases:

- A work accomplished,
- A name manifest, and
- Words that were uttered.

He came from God and he went to God. That is a Christian life.

Now tell me, where did you get your Christian life? Did you have it when you were born into this world? Of course not. You got it when you believed in Jesus Christ. It came from God. It was with the Father before you received it because it was in Jesus Christ. This life is in his Son. "He that has the Son has life; he that has not the Son of God has not life," {cf, 1 Jn 5:12}.

It came from God. Where is it going when you get through with it here on earth? Where does it go? Every Christian believes it goes to the Father. "To depart and to be with Christ is far better," {cf, Phil 1:23}. So these words are true of you as well. It came from God, it goes to God.

What is in between? A life that glorifies the Father? The manifesting before the world of a name that empowers men? The uttering of words that grip them and bring them to a realization of their own need and to an understanding of truth and reality? You see, Jesus is praying a prayer that includes all of us, and, the astonishing thing is, there is not a word of this prayer that you and I cannot pray as well.

May God stop us from piddling around in the shallows of Christian living any longer and lead us to lay hold of the mighty, transforming, dynamic of Christian life that Jesus himself manifested.

Prayer

Oh, Father! These words of the Lord Jesus search us, they reveal to us things that we never have known before, mighty facts, so awesome that we can scarcely believe them. But Lord, help us to remember where they come from and thus that they are true and to stand upon them with boldness and with confidence. Keep us from being ineffective, ordinary Christians, involved in this bland, luxury-loving, ease-loving Christianity that is so frequent today. Lord, challenge us individually, one by one, as we, gather at the Lord's table, to be among those who are ready to fling our lives away for Jesus Christ, to be utterly careless of what happens to us in order that he may be glorified. We pray in his name, Amen.

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