

Prayers of Paul

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I begin with two of what may be called Paul's prayers.

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with might through his Spirit in the inner man, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. (*Eph 3.14-19*)

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (*Phil 2.5-11*)

It's not easy to pick out readily discernable prayers in Paul's letters. I think that's because his letters as a whole are prayers. For Paul what is apparent in his letters is that his whole being, his entire life is itself prayer. If we were to characterize Paul's prayers, that would be exhortation to his readers and exultation of Christ.

Thomas Merton said, "Life in Christ is life in the mystery of the Cross." By that he means that life in Christ is essentially participation in God's act of redemption of the world through death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And the pattern of participation is a three-fold vocation: self-denial, taking up the cross and following Jesus. This was, in fact, the pattern of Jesus' own life: self-giving pilgrimage toward crucifixion. And this also was Paul's life.

One spiritual writer wrote that when she stopped asking what she wanted out of life, but instead began asking what life wanted out of her, she experienced a major change in her life. What she experienced was a form of self-denial. She stopped being self-centred and began to be life-centred.

In the same way, self-denial takes us out of ourselves, out of our self-centred concerns and selfish wants. Self-denial is essentially a life of prayer, in which we open ourselves to listen to God's voice constantly beckoning us to return to him, to discern the will of God constantly unfolding to us new mysteries of life. Self-denial means to keep our hearts, minds and souls open to God's will that our will may be in line with God. Often times, however, we figure out God's will in line with our will and keep it rigidly fixed to serve and justify our agenda. Self-denial means emptying ourselves in order that we may be filled with God's grace.

Taking up the cross is an act of sacrifice rooted in prayer. In crucifixion Jesus offered himself as a sacrifice for our redemption. Taking up the cross means participating in his sacrifice. To a great extent, we have lost the sense of sacrifice and the true meaning of sacrifice. Sacrifice is often seen as something subjective and difficult. Even among Christians, sacrifice is meant as a

moral act marked by a special difficulty. But the true notion of sacrifice is something quite objective. The difficulty and pain are not essential to it, but rather incidental. Jesus did not go to Calvary begrudgingly and unwillingly. Rather he handed himself over to death on the Cross willingly and perhaps even joyfully for he was doing the will of God.

Jesus poses a question which is too often overlooked: “What will a man give in exchange for his life?” (*Matthew 16.26*) This is a rhetorical question. Jesus has given his earthly life for eternal life. It is in light of this rhetorical question and the larger context of the Messiahship of Jesus, we must come to understand his call, “Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me.”

Life we live as followers of Christ has a larger context, which is the glory of the Messiahship of Jesus Christ. We are called to follow Jesus and to participate in his life of death and resurrection. Self-denial is not an exercise merely in self-improvement and self-control, but a way of life which points toward God’s love and mercy. Taking up the cross must not be an act of self-gratification and self-justification, but an act of faith grounded in the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ, the very act of salvation of the world. We are to follow Jesus to where ever he leads us, not lead Jesus to where we want to go. And the place we are to follow Jesus is Calvary, to his Cross. It is there before the Cross of Christ we lay down our lives that we may be given eternal life. This is also the life Paul exemplifies to all of us, the life which is wholly prayer offered to Christ.

What will you give in exchange for your life?