

PRAYER IN LUKE-ACTS*

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The general subject of 'prayer' in the New Testament has, by and large, been neglected by scholars. In 1965 Wilhelm Ott¹ noted that although Luke had rightly been called 'the evangelist of prayer'² the exact significance of this had not been assessed. All too often commentators had noted that the Third Evangelist made many references to the subject that were not found in either of the other Synoptists but these instances had not been evaluated.

In an attempt to fill this need Ott published the results of his research on Lukan prayer in a monograph. As the sub-title suggests, *Die Bedeutung der Gebetsparänese in der lukanischen Theologie*, Ott's study concentrated on the paraenetic material of the Gospel (particularly the Parable of the Unjust Judge, Luke 18:1-8), and in contrast to Matthew's presentation of prayer as an expectation of God's coming, he understood the Lukan emphasis to be: men 'ought always to pray and not lose heart' (Luke 18:1). The example of Jesus at prayer, according to Ott, buttressed this Lukan demand for unceasing petition which was set against the background of: (1) temptations which began with the passion of Jesus and would continue; and (2) the church would remain in the world for an indefinitely long period of time, and its members needed to be on guard so that their faith would not be stifled.³ In a brief (thirteen-page) survey of the prayer material in Acts⁴ the

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¹ W. Ott, *Gebet und Heil. Die Bedeutung der Gebetsparänese in der lukanischen Theologie*, München (1965) 13.

² By A. Hamman, *La Prière. I. Le Nouveau Testament*, Tournai (1959) 144. He notes that the Gospel opens with God's people at prayer (1:10) and closes with the believers joyfully blessing God in the Temple (24:53).

³ Ott's indebtedness (*Gebet*, esp. 85-90) to H. Conzelmann, *Die Mitte der Zeit*, Tübingen (1953) 73-75 (English translation, *The Theology of St Luke*, London (1960) 80-83) at these points is obvious.

⁴ Ott, *Gebet*, 124-136.

writer showed that the early church heeded this injunction to unceasing prayer (*e.g.* Acts 2:41f.), thus following the example of her Lord.⁵ The second volume of Luke's history, like the first, pointed to the necessity of this prayer 'for the preservation of faith'. Thus to Ott 'Prayer and Salvation' has become 'Prayer *for* Salvation'.

Although this author has brought out several important points about the Lukan paraenetic material on prayer, several weaknesses appear: (1) his brief treatment of Luke's second volume has not done justice to the prayer material contained in that work; (2) the Third Evangelist in both the Gospel and Acts has employed this motif of prayer at critical moments in his history of salvation, and this suggests that he considers prayer to have been an important means by which God has guided His people.⁶ Ott has paid little or no attention to this. And therefore (3) although Luke is concerned to promote the practice of prayer among his readers (as Ott has shown), it may not be his primary interest.⁷ Rather, prayer is shown to be the means by which God has guided the course of redemptive history, both in the life of Jesus and in the period of the church's expansion.⁸

Our purpose in this brief paper is to draw attention to the more important data on prayer in Luke-Acts, to note the general significance of this motif in the two-volume work, and thus to point to avenues for further research.

I. THE GENERAL SIGNIFICANCE OF PRAYER IN LUKE'S GOSPEL

Scholars have long recognized, though as we have noted few have assessed its significance, that prayer is a characteristic

⁵ 'Die Urgemeinde befolgt nach Lukas also das Gebot ihres Herrn, unablässig zu beten', *ibid.*, 128. On the subject of unceasing prayer in the New Testament see also G. Harder, *Paulus und das Gebet*, Gütersloh (1936) 8ff., and R. Kerkhoff, *Das unablässige Gebet. Beitrage zur Lehre vom immerwährenden Beten im Neuen Testament*, München (1954).

⁶ See below for the instances, recorded by Luke, of Jesus at prayer.

⁷ Further, Ott's contention that the Parable of the Unjust Judge (Luke 8:1ff.), which originally referred to importunity in prayer, and has been turned by Luke into an admonition to disciples to remain faithful until the parousia, is suspect on exegetical grounds (see below). Since Ott is heavily indebted to Conzelmann in considering Luke has given up the imminent expectation of the parousia, because of its failure to appear, and written in terms of a long period of the church, he is open to the same objections that have been levelled against Conzelmann.

⁸ O. G. Harris, *Prayer in Luke-Acts. A Study in the Theology of Luke* (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 1966), has developed this theme.

emphasis of the Third Gospel. A brief glance at the statistics suggests this.⁹ προσεύχομαι, 'to pray, offer petition', appears nineteen times¹⁰ in this Gospel, as against ten occurrences in Mark and fifteen in Matthew. When the instances from Acts are added it is noted that the word is used by Luke thirty-five times (out of a total eighty-six occurrences in the New Testament). It is a well-known fact that Paul frequently refers to petitionary prayer—in thanksgiving paragraphs, in wish-prayers, within paraenetic contexts and in didactic passages of his letters. But in the *corpus Paulinum* there are fewer instances of προσεύχομαι and προσευχή (a total of thirty-three occurrences) than in the Lukan writings (forty-seven times). In the Third Gospel these two words appear twenty-two times while in Mark the combined total is twelve occurrences and in Matthew it is seventeen. Other terms which, broadly speaking, refer to prayer, e.g. δέομαι and δέησις, αἰνέω, εὐλογέω and εὐχαριστέω also occur in the Gospel of Luke.¹¹ Thanksgiving does not occupy the prominent place in the Lukan writings that it has in Paul, or indeed that it had in Philo where εὐχαριστέω and an unusually large number of derivatives occurred. But a survey of the prayer terminology used in Luke-Acts suggests that the theme of prayer—particularly petitionary prayer—is not unimportant.

However, statistics can mislead. It might be argued, for instance, that the difference between these figures for Matthew and Luke is not great, especially when it is noted that Matthew's 28 chapters appear on only 98 pages of the Nestle edition of the Greek New Testament, while Luke's 24 chapters appear on 111 pages. More important for our purposes are the contexts in which these terms appear, and the fact that three parables about prayer (the Friend at Midnight, Luke 11:5-8; the Unjust Judge, 18:1-8; and the Pharisee and the Publican, 18:9-14) occur only in Luke.

(a) *Examples of Prayer Recorded in Luke's Gospel*

It is the Third Evangelist who links petitionary prayer with

⁹ The following statistics are taken from R. Morgenthaler, *Statistik des neutestamentlichen Wortschatzes*, Zürich (1958).

¹⁰ Luke 1:10; 3:21; 5:56; 6:12, 28; 9:18, 28, 29; 11:1 (twice), 2; 18:1, 10, 11; 20:47; 22:40, 41, 44, 46. The cognate noun is used at 6:12; 19:46 and 22:45.

¹¹ δέομαι: 8 times (Acts 7 occurrences); δέησις:3; αἰνέω: 3 (Acts: 3); εὐλογέω: 13 (Acts: 2); εὐχαριστέω: 4 (Acts: 2).

the birth of John the Baptist (Zechariah's δέησις, 'petition', for a son is heard, Luke 1:13,¹² as the people are praying in the Temple, verse 10). Only Luke links prayer with the descent of the Spirit at Jesus' baptism (3:21). Indeed, as Creed has pointed out, by using the present participle προσευχομένου 'praying' (in contrast to the aorist βαπτισθέντος, 'baptized') Luke evidently intends us to understand that 'the descent of the Spirit [was] coincident with the prayer of Jesus, not with his baptism, which has already been completed'.¹³ This is consistent with other Lukan references where the Spirit is given in answer to prayer (Luke 11:2 (Marcion), 11:13; Acts 1:14 with 2:1-4; 4:23-31; 8:15-17).¹⁴

Only the Third Evangelist records that Jesus, after the healing of a leper and prior to the first major clash with the scribes and Pharisees, sought the solitude of a desert place to pray (5:16).¹⁵ According to Rengstorf: 'Hier, im Umgang mit Gott, liegen die Motive seines Wirkens und die Wurzeln seiner Kraft'.¹⁶ According to Luke alone, Jesus, prior to the choosing of the Twelve Disciples (6:12ff.), spent the whole night in

¹² A. Plummer, *The Gospel According to S. Luke*⁵, Edinburgh (1922) 12f., considering it unlikely that Zechariah would have made his private wishes the main subject of his prayer on such an important occasion, suggests Zechariah and the people 'were praying for the redemption of Israel—for the coming of the Messiah's kingdom; and it is this supplication which was heard', so also J. N. Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, London (1950) 63f. J. M. Creed, *The Gospel According to St Luke*, London (1930) 10, thinks this is too subtle, and notes 'the following words imply that he had prayed for a son'; cf. F. Godet, *A Commentary on the Gospel of St. Luke*⁵, I, ET., Edinburgh (1893) 77, who considers the context and the personal pronouns in the singular 'prove positively the entirely personal character of the prayer and its answer'; H. Greeven, *TDNT* II, 807: . . . the concrete request, implied though not expressly stated, which Zacharias makes for a son'; and Hamman, *Prière*, 144. But it is not unreasonable with G. B. Caird, *Saint Luke*, London (1963) 51, and E. E. Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke*, London (1966) 66, to understand the answer to be to Zechariah's individual prayer and his national longings.

¹³ Creed, *Luke*, 57; cf. J. D. G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, London (1970) 33; G. W. H. Lampe, *The Seal of the Spirit*, London (1951) 42f.; and 'The Holy Spirit in the Writings of St Luke', in *Studies in the Gospels. Essays in Memory of R. H. Lightfoot*, ed. D. E. Nineham, Oxford (1955) 168f.; Hamman, *Prière*, 78; Ellis, *Luke*, 91; H. Flender, *St Luke. Theologian of Redemptive History*, E.T., London (1967) 51.

¹⁴ Lampe, *art. cit.*, 169, observes that 'One of the most characteristic features of St Luke's teaching . . . [is] his insistence upon prayer as the means by which the dynamic energy of the Spirit is apprehended'. According to Lampe, in the Lukan writings: 'Prayer is . . . complementary to the Spirit's activity since it is the point at which the communication of the divine influence becomes effective for its recipients.' See also note 53.

¹⁵ Hamman, *Prière*, 80, on the basis of the present tense, προσευχόμενος, suggests it was Jesus' regular practice to resort to prayer.

¹⁶ K. H. Rengstorf, *Das Evangelium nach Lukas*¹⁰, Göttingen (1965) 76.

prayer to God. By this the Third Evangelist emphasizes the momentous issues of the choice which was to be made.¹⁷

Although all three Synoptists mention Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi, the summit of Jesus' ministry (Matt. 16:13-23; Mark 8:27-33; Luke 9:18-22), it is Luke who introduces the pericope with the words: 'Now it happened that as he was praying alone the disciples were with him', verse 18. In contrast to the people in general, Peter infers the true Messianic significance of Jesus' acts and, as Ellis points out, he 'thereby fulfils the Lord's earlier prophecy: "to you it has been given" ' (8:10).¹⁸ By his introductory words the Third Evangelist wishes us to understand that the petition of Jesus had been effective since the Father has revealed to Peter the secret of His Messianic person and dignity.¹⁹

The Transfiguration, Luke 9:28ff. and parallels, according to Ellis, is 'a prophetic preview of both the future glory and the true nature of Jesus' messiahship'.²⁰ Elements from the Son of Man (Dan. 7:13) and the vision of God at Mt. Sinai make up the primary motif in the Transfiguration. Here Jesus is separated from the crowds (verses 28, 37), and it is Luke who tells us that He took Peter, James and John 'on the mountain to pray', verse 28 (the infinitive προσεύξασθαι expresses purpose). The immediately following words of verse 29 indicate that Jesus was transfigured as He was praying (note the present tense used). Indeed, we may add with Hamman: 'It is as if the Transfiguration is called forth by prayer.'²¹

In the pericope about Peter's denial (Luke 22:31-34), one of the few objects of Jesus' prayers²² is spelled out: 'I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail', verse 32. On the basis of Peter's approaching denial (verse 34), Satan demands to have him as well as Judas. But against Satan's accusation Jesus makes priestly intercession for Peter.²³ If the plural 'you' of verse 31 refers to all the disciples, as most commentators suppose, then we have another instance of Peter's representa-

¹⁷ Creed, *Luke*, 87; cf. Caird, *Luke*, 100; Plummer, *Luke*, 171; Rengstorff, *Lukas*, 83, comments: 'Wenn es heisst, er habe die der Wahl vorausgehende Nacht im Gebet verbracht . . . , so beleuchtet das die Wichtigkeit seiner Entscheidung.'

¹⁸ Ellis, *Luke*, 139; cf. H. Greeven, *Gebet und Eschatologie im Neuen Testament*, Gütersloh (1931) 18.

¹⁹ Hamman, *Prière*, 80.

²⁰ Ellis, *Luke*, 141f.

²¹ Hamman, *Prière*, 81.

²² Although Luke does not often mention the specific objects of Jesus' petitions these may usually be inferred from their contexts.

²³ So W. Foerster, 'Lukas 22, 31f.', *ZNW* 46 (1935) 129-33, and Ellis, *Luke*, 255.

tive role. Jesus prays for Peter, so that he in turn may strengthen others.²⁴

All three Synoptists mention Jesus' praying in Gethsemane (Matt. 26:36-46; Mark 14:32-42; Luke 22:40-46). But only Luke records the prayer on the cross (23:34): 'Father, forgive them . . .' (if the verse is genuine),²⁵ and the 'evening prayer' (as Strack-Billerbeck have termed it) of 23:46: 'Then Jesus crying with a loud voice, said: "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit." '

(b) *Teaching on Prayer Recorded by the Third Evangelist*

When we turn from the instances of praying to the teaching on prayer in Luke's Gospel we note that the Third Evangelist has presented several distinctive emphases. On examining the Markan material, which is very slight (Mark 11:24, 25; 13:18; 14:38), we observe (in contrast to Matthew and Luke) that the Second Evangelist shows little interest in the subject. The Lord's Prayer is omitted, and in the few instances where prayer terms are found Mark's primary concern is not with prayer as such.²⁶

The Matthaean data is considerably more extensive than that of the Second Evangelist, even including references not found in Luke (e.g. Matt. 6:5-8, 14f.; 18:19f.; 21:22; 24:20). Nevertheless, Matthew does not have the systematic interest in prayer that marks out the Third Evangelist. Thus references grouped together in Matthew 6:5-15 appear under the general rubric of 'True Piety' (prayer is one element here, just as fasting is another), while in chapter 18:19f. where the theme of answered prayer occurs, it is presented as an illustration of blessing that comes from unanimity.²⁷ At chapter 21:21f., in the context of casting the mountain into the sea, it is faith,²⁸ rather than prayer, that is in question. The exhortations to

²⁴ Creed, *Luke*, 269; Rengstorf, *Lukas*, 248; Lampe, 'Luke' in *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*², ed. M. Black and H. H. Rowley, London (1962) 840f.; A. R. C. Leaney, *The Gospel According to St Luke*², London (1966) 270. Ellis, *Luke*, 256, mentions this as a possibility, while Ott, *Gebet*, 81, states: 'diese Szene nicht nur von der Person Petri handelt . . . Jesus betet, dass der Glaube Petri nicht aufhöre, und Petrus soll nach seiner Umkehr seine Brüder stärken'.

²⁵ For a discussion see Ellis, *Luke*, 267f.

²⁶ So correctly Ott, *Gebet*, 16f. In the Markan contexts the interest is centred on faith, readiness to forgive, etc., rather than on prayer.

²⁷ Ott, *Gebet*, 17.

²⁸ Note Matt. 21:21, 'if you have *faith* and *never doubt*'; and verse 22, 'whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have *faith*'.

prayer in Matthew 24:20 and 26:41 arise from the particular nations described (*i.e.* flight will be in winter, and the spirit willing while the flesh is weak), and are not in the first stance presented as general instruction as the Lukan parallels are. We do not wish to imply that the First Evangelist has no interest in the subject of prayer. The data scattered throughout his Gospel militates against such a conclusion. Rather, he does not have the systematic interest of the Third Evangelist, since prayer in Matthew often occurs in contexts where other issues predominate. That there are no distinctive Matthaean parables on this theme lends credence to this view.

It has been suggested that the Third Evangelist has presented several distinctive emphases of Jesus' teaching on prayer. These may be ascertained: (1) from an examination of the distinctively Lukan parables on the subject, and (2) by noting the way Luke handles material common to Matthew and himself.

(1) *Lukan Parables on Prayer. The Unjust Judge, 18:1-8.* This parable is a notoriously difficult one to unravel.²⁹ Verses 2-5 are the kernel with verses 6-8 forming the conclusion, or even the double conclusion. The judge is described as corrupt (verse 6), being much too hardened and worldly to care about poor and unimportant people. But out of exasperation he satisfies the just complaint of the widow who comes repeatedly³⁰ to him. How much more will God answer persistent prayer. He will 'vindicate'³¹ His children who are suffering and dying. His last judgment which is certain will come soon.³²

Apparently Luke is writing to a situation in which Christians, under severe persecution, are denying their faith. Verse 8b (whether it is an independent saying of Jesus or a Lukan addition)³³ suggests an appalling crisis. God will assuredly

²⁹ Apart from the commentaries see also C. E. B. Cranfield, 'The Parable of the unjust Judge and the Eschatology of Luke-Acts', *SJT* 16 (1963) 297-301; G. 'Das Gleichnis vom gottlosen Richter', *ZNW* 53 (1962) 1-25; J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*², E.T., London (1963) 153-157; Ott, *Gebet*, 32-72.

³⁰ ἦρχετο, according to Jeremias, *Parables*, 153, is an iterative imperfect (= 'repeatedly').

³¹ This is a key word, occurring four times (verses 3, 5, 7 and 8), and it binds together the parable and its application.

³² It is better on linguistic grounds to take ἐν τάχει, verse 8, as meaning 'soon' rather than 'suddenly'; see Cranfield, *SJT* 16 (1963) 299f.; and S. G. Wilson, 'Lukan Eschatology', *NTS* 15 (1969-70) 330-347, especially 340f.; contra Jeremias, *Parables*, 155; Ellis, *Luke*, 214; and Ott, *Gebet*, 63-65.

³³ Jeremias, in the revised edition of his *Parables*, 1536. (E.T. based on the 6th German edition), defends the whole section as authentic, particularly 8b. He thus reversed his earlier judgment that this conclusion to the parable had been inserted by Luke.

vindicate His servants soon. The parousia may be near, but the saints are to remember (and this is the point of verse 8b) that when it comes the parousia will mean judgment for them as well as for their persecutors. Will they themselves be found faithful when the Lord comes?

Ott, following Conzelmann, considers that by means of his redactional additions³⁴ the Third Evangelist is encouraging the readers to remain faithful until the delayed parousia arrives. Indeed, they are to pray for faith (18:1). But this is doubtful. Although verse 1, the Evangelist's comment, does not specifically mention the content of the prayer,³⁵ in the immediate context of the parable as well as in chapters 17:20-18:14 as a whole, it is best to understand it as a petition for the coming of the Lord.³⁶ The church is ever to pray *Marana tha* (1 Cor. 16:22) and not to lose heart.

The Pharisee and the Publican, 18:9-14. This parable, found only in Luke, though it mentions prayer, is primarily concerned with righteousness (*cf.* verse 14). If the parable furnishes any guidance concerning the right way to pray it is that prayer should be humble, and that the person praying should have a true dependence on God.³⁷ In the two preceding episodes Luke is dealing with a pending judgment (17:20-37) in which strict justice will be meted out (18:1-8). Who then will be found just? This parable gives the answer.

The Friend at Midnight, 11:5-8. The Parable of the Friend at Midnight teaches persistence in prayer. The scene is set in a Palestinian village hut.³⁸ To get bread at midnight would arouse the whole, sleeping family. Such a request is outrageous. Indeed, which of you would ask such a thing (verse 5)? Yet persistence is rewarded. How much more will persistent prayer for the gifts of the New Age, *i.e.* the Holy Spirit, be rewarded?

³⁴ Ott, *Gebet*, 32-34, 41f., 63-66.

³⁵ A point emphasized by Greeven, *Gebet*, 66. T. W. Manson and Creed, *Luke*, 222, considered the introductory words did not tally with the content of the parable; while Plummer, *Luke*, 471, understood the reference to prayer in general.

³⁶ Ellis, *Luke*, 273, H.-W. Bartsch, *Wachet aber zu jeder Zeit!*, Hamburg—Bergstedt (1963) 119f., rightly rejects Conzelmann's view (and with it Ott's interpretation) that the parable is a commendation of prayer as a custom during the long period until the parousia. Instead, the petition is expressed for the ardently expected day of the parousia; see J. Rohde, *Rediscovering the Teaching of the Evangelists*, E.T., London (1968) i88.

³⁷ Hamman, *Prière*, 151-153.

³⁸ Note Jeremias' vivid description of the setting; *Parables*, 157-759; *cf.* Ellis, *Luke*, 163f.

(2) *Material Common to Matthew and Luke*, In the sequel to the Parable of the Friend at Midnight Luke utilizes material that is also found in Matthew. The superscription to the section, at Luke 11:1, is concerning prayer, and the whole pericope is not in the first instance about God, or His Fatherhood. Verse 9-13 are introduced by the words: 'And I tell you', a peculiarity of the Lukan source. Thus the group of logia, preserved by Matthew as an independent unit (7:7-11), has been used by Luke as an application to the parable.

Furthermore, the emphasis of Luke is different from that of Matthew. The latter source—the logia are found in the Sermon on the Mount—puts the thrust on the *answer* to prayer as chap. 7:8 makes plain with the three finite verbs 'receives,' 'finds' and 'will be opened'. Luke, however, accents the admonition to pray. To him it is the *ask, seek, knock* (11:10) that are important. And this is consistent with the general context of chap. 11 where one of Jesus' disciples says to Him; 'Lord, teach us to pray' (verse 1).

Another distinction between Matthew and Luke is seen at the conclusion of the paragraph. The First Evangelist states: 'how much more shall your Father in heaven give good things (ἀγαθὰ) to those who ask him?' (Matt. 7:10. Luke has the well-known variant: 'shall give the Holy Spirit (πνεῦμα ἅγιον) to those who ask him?' Whether we consider the Lukan form to be original, or that the Third Evangelist 'peshers' the original 'good things',³⁹ to use Ellis' phrase, is not important for our purposes. The Holy Spirit given in answer to prayer, as we have noted above, is a significant theme in the Lukan writings.

Such is consistent with the teaching on petitionary prayer for spiritual goods⁴⁰ recorded in Luke. At Luke 18:1 Christians are to pray for the coming of the Lord; at 22:40 that they might not enter into temptation, while in a Son of Man saying (21:36) their prayer is that they may have strength 'to escape. . . and to stand before the Son of Man'. According to Luke God already knows that His saints have need of earthly things (Luke 12:30). It is almost as if Luke forbids the asking for

³⁹ Jeremias claims, *Parables*, 145, that 'good things' has the same eschatological significance as Holy Spirit, since in rabbinic literature it frequently designated the gifts of the Messianic Age to come. Ellis, *Luke*, 164, on the other hand, considers Luke 'peshers' the original 'good things'. See further Ott, *Gebet*, 107f.

⁴⁰ Ott, *Gebet*, 108f.

earthly things⁴¹ (cf. 12:31 and the parallel, Matt. 6:33).

Disciples stand in contrast to the Gentiles who seek all these things (Luke 12:30).

It is not our intention to discuss in detail the Lord's Prayer.⁴²

More important for our purposes is the context in Luke: A disciple, hearing Jesus pray, asks Him to teach them a proper prayer. Jesus fulfils this request with the Lord's Prayer.

According to Schmid Luke has not understood the text as a form for prayer but as 'a model of true Christian prayer rich in content'.⁴³ By contrast, in the Matthaean context Jesus admonishes the disciples not to 'heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do'. As children of the heavenly Father His disciples do not need to employ many words (Matt. 6:7f.). The Lord's Prayer then follows as an example of brief prayer (verses 9-13).⁴⁴

From the examples of prayer recorded by the Third Evangelist, as well as the teaching in the Gospel, it is now possible to make some concluding observations about the general significance of this prayer motif:

1. Luke presents a far fuller picture of Jesus at prayer than either of the other Synoptists. That the Third Evangelist has only a biographical or christological interest in Jesus' prayer life is ruled out by where the report of Jesus praying is an occasion for passing on the Lord's Prayer to the disciples.

2. This *Vorbildcharakter* of Jesus' prayer is particularly clear in the scene on the Mount of Olives (Luke 22:39-46). All three Synoptists record that Jesus prayed. In fact, Mark and Matthew, but not Luke, mention that Jesus prayed three times in the Garden. The Lukan account brackets Jesus' prayer with His admonition to the disciples, 'pray that you may not enter into temptation'. The temptations to which the Christians are exposed can be endured and overcome only through prayer. Such temptations are an abiding feature of the time of the end, the situation in which the Christian lives between the cross and

⁴¹ Matt. 6:33 reads: But seek first (πρῶτον) his kingdom . . . and all these things shall be yours as well'; while the Lukan parallel (12:30 has: 'Instead (πλὴν), seek his kingdom, and all these things shall be yours as well.'

⁴² Concerning its original form Jeremias, *Prayers*, 93, at the conclusion of his important researches, summarized the results as follows: 'the Lukan version has preserved the oldest form with respect to length, but the Matthaean text is more original with regard to *wording*'. Not all, however, have agreed with Jeremias' conclusions; cf. I. H. Marshall, *Luke. Historian and Theologian*, Exeter (1970) 115.

⁴³ J. Schmid, *Das Evangelium nach Lukas*³, Regensburg (1955) 197.

⁴⁴ J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology*. I. The Proclamation of Jesus, E.T., London (1971) 192.

the parousia. To enter into temptation means to succumb to its power. As the disciples fall asleep Jesus sees a lethargy toward the peril of temptation, and so He admonishes them twice to follow His example by using the weapon that really counts.

3. The Lukan teaching on prayer emphasizes the need to engage in this activity continuously, and that for spiritual ends, e.g. for the coming of the Lord (18:1), the Holy Spirit (11:13), not to enter temptation (22:39, 46), and so on.

4. At the same time the examples of people at prayer, especially Jesus, do not simply have a biographical or parae-netic function. The Third Evangelist employs this motif at critical moments in his history of salvation, indicating that petitionary prayer is an important means by which God has guided His people.

II. THE PLACE OF PRAYER IN ACTS

(a) *Similarities with the Gospel*

Attention has already been drawn to the linguistic similarities between the Third Gospel and Acts with reference to προσεύ-χομαι and its cognate προσευχή. Other terms used in Acts, as well as in the Gospel, for prayer are: (δέομαι (four times),⁴⁵ εὐχαριστέω (twice),⁴⁶ and κράζω (twice, of Stephen);⁴⁷ while the following, found in prayer contexts in Acts, do not appear in the Gospel: προσκατερέω (three times),⁴⁸ the adverb ὁμαθυμαδόν (twice)⁴⁹ which indicates unity of purpose (though not necessarily in prayer; cf. 7:57; 18:12; 19:29).

Once again, however, it is noted that the statements and contexts in which the words⁵⁰ are mentioned are more important than the statistics about the technical terms. If Luke in his Gospel presents a full picture of Jesus at prayer, then in his second volume he frequently indicates that the early church

⁴⁵ Acts 4:31; 8:22, 24; 10:2. See note 11.

⁴⁶ Acts 27:35; 28:15. ⁴⁷ Acts 7:57, 60. ⁴⁸ Acts 1:14; 2:42; 6:4.

⁴⁹ Acts 1:14; 4:24. On the significance of this word see J. M. Nielen, *Gebet und Gottesdienst im Neuen Testament*, Freiburg-i.-Br. (1937) 147-149. ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτὸ, a phrase which seems to have acquired a quasi-technical sense almost equivalent to ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ, is also found in prayer contexts and accents the idea of unity or unanimity in prayer.

⁵⁰ The number of recorded prayers in Acts, as in the third Gospel are few—three in all: the petition of the early church prior to the choice of Matthias, Acts 1:24; the prayer for boldness, 4:24ff.; and, Stephen's prayer at the point of his death, 7:59f.

and its individual members,⁵¹ including apostles, were engaged in this same petitionary activity. Some of the incidents recorded in Acts are direct and, we may add, deliberate parallels to those found in the Gospel.⁵² Immediately after His baptism Jesus prays and receives the Holy Spirit (Luke 3:21); the apostles and their companions (Acts 1:14) pray before the descent of the Spirit upon them (2:1-4).⁵³ At Acts 8:15 Peter and John pray for the Samaritans that they may receive the Holy Spirit. After the apostles lay hands on them the Holy Spirit descends (8:17). Jesus prayed before the choice of the Twelve (Luke 6:12); the early church prays before selecting Matthias (Acts 1:24). Jesus, at the point of His death, prays that His enemies may be forgiven (Luke 21:34), while Stephen, before falling asleep, cries in a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them' (Acts 7:60). And as Jesus offered the 'evening prayer', committing His spirit, in the words of the Psalmist, to the Father's care (Luke 23:46), so the first martyr calls upon the Lord Jesus and cries, 'receive my spirit' (Acts 7:59).

At other points too we note that the early church of Acts prayed. This is most clearly presented by Luke in the summary statements of chaps. 2:41f., 47, and the reference at 1:14. 'Continuing in prayer' (*cf.* also 6:4), used in these passages, like the synonyms 'always', 'unceasing', 'day and night', etc., when used with verbs of prayer or thanksgiving do not refer to uninterrupted praying but to the keeping of regular hours of prayer—as Harder, Kerkhoff, Jeremias⁵⁴ and others have shown. The Jewish hours of prayer are obviously included—Acts twice refers to the afternoon prayer at 3.00 p.m. (3:1; 10:3, 30). But the early church, like Jesus, was not content with liturgical custom. Peter prays at noon (10:9), and the Jerusalem church interceded at night for the imprisoned apostle (12:5, 6); while Paul and Silas praise God in prison at midnight (16:25).

⁵¹ Ott, *Gebet*, 131-136, in particular, lays great stress on the prayers of individuals in Acts, especially those prayers for salvation, *e.g.* Simon Magus, 8:22, 24; Cornelius, 10:4, 31; the citation of Joel 2:28-32 in Acts 2.

⁵² These were noted by F. Hauck, *Das Evangelium des Lukas*, Leipzig (1934) 153.

⁵³ The close relationship between prayer and the Spirit cannot be over-emphasized, as Lampe has shown: 'the gift of the Holy Spirit [is] . . . God's principal answer to human prayer', *art. cit.*, 170; *cf.* his *Seal*, 43f. This is true whether it refers to an initial giving of the Spirit (*e.g.*, Acts 8:15, 17), or a subsequent filling of the Spirit (4:31), in answer to prayer.

⁵⁴ Harder, *Paulus*, 8ff.; Kerkhoff, *Gebet*, 39f.; Jeremias, *Prayers*, 78ff.

In Luke's second volume there is no prayer instruction such as found in the Gospel at 11:1-13, nor are there any exhortations to 'unceasing prayer' in the sense of Luke 18:1-8; 21:36 or 22:39-46. Nevertheless, the above-mentioned references in the early chapters of Acts present the picture of a church and its members regularly engaged in prayer, whether it be in the Temple at the regular hours, or in houses and on roof-tops at other times. We thus agree with Hamman's comment: 'The church, after the example and precept of her Lord, is diligent in prayer. It is a characteristic element of its life.'⁵⁵ Luke wishes us to understand that by praying regularly the *Urge-meinde* followed the example of its Lord, set forth so clearly in his first work.

(b) *Prayer and the Church's Expansion*

If Luke in his Gospel underlines the point that prayer is for 'spiritual ends', then the second volume of his work bears this out in practice as the early church and its members pray for their missionary activity and the needs directly related to it.

The first actual prayer concerns the election of Matthias (Acts 1:24). Addressed in the second person ('Lord'), possibly to God,⁵⁶ it is a petition that He will reveal the one whom He has chosen to fill the vacancy created by Judas' defection. The request is answered in the casting of the lot and the number of the apostles is restored to twelve in the appointment of Matthias.

The second explicit prayer (Acts 4:24-30) reminds one of certain Old Testament prayers, especially that of Hezekiah (Isaiah 37:16-20; 2 Kings 19:15-19). After a lengthy historical preamble (verses 24-28) the three-fold request is directed to God that He may look upon their enemies (verse 29) and attend their ministry with signs and wonders (verse 30). The request is answered as the Holy Spirit fills them, equipping them for their task of speaking the word plainly.

The opposition to the spread of the Word reached its height when Herod Agrippa I executed James the son of Zebedee and

⁵⁵ *Op. cit.*, 250.

⁵⁶ Whether 'Lord' refers to God the Father or the Lord Jesus is uncertain. In favour of the latter is the verb 'thou hast chosen' (verse 24) which was used at verse 2 of choosing the apostles by Jesus. On the other hand, the attribute 'who knowest the hearts' is always used by Luke with reference to God: Acts 15:8; Luke 16:15.

had Peter arrested and thrown into prison (Acts 12:1 ff.). The attack was directed against the church (verse 1), and it was the church which resorted to prayer (verse 5). Luke does not record the specific request(s) directed to God, though he does indicate that the intercession was continuous⁵⁷ and earnest (ἐκτενῶς, verse 5). The context, however, makes clear that the church was praying for Peter's release,⁵⁸ though the reply given to Rhoda ('You are mad', verse 15) when she announced the apostle's arrival indicates they were not entirely confident that their intercession would be granted!

Other references to prayer in Luke's second volume are bound up with 'the spread of the message of salvation': a fundamental theme of the book. So petitionary prayer in the form of intercession precedes miracles such as the raising of Dorcas from death by Peter (9:40, 'Peter . . . knelt down and prayed'); and the healing by Paul of Publius' father who had been suffering from intermittent attacks of gastric fever and dysentery⁵⁹ (28:8, 'Paul visited him and prayed . . . and healed him'). The aorist tenses in both instances point to specific requests by the apostles for those in need. In the former incident the result was that 'many believed in the Lord' (9:42), while in the latter, Paul and his companions were sped on their way to Rome with the goodwill of the Maltese and a supply of things that would minister to their needs (28:9f.). Such signs and wonders were the seal of God's approval on their witness (cf. 4:30, where the Jerusalem church requested God to grant 'that signs and wonders may be done through the name of thy holy servant Jesus').

We have already noted that the choice of an apostle was in answer to a request by the Jerusalem church. The commissioning of the Seven (Acts 6:1 ff.) was accompanied by prayer and the laying on of hands (verse 6). By setting aside these men for the supervision of the community's financial arrangements the apostles could now devote their attention 'to prayer and to the

⁵⁷ Note the unusual periphrasis ἦν . . . γινομένη, which lays special emphasis on the continuity of the praying; so F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*², London (1952) 245; cf. the periphrastic 'were praying' of verse 12 which describes the church's activity when Peter arrived at John Mark's home.

⁵⁸ Greeven, *Gebet*, 122f., somewhat unusually, considers this to be an example, based on Jesus' injunction, of the church praying for her enemies. The context suggests, rather, that the church resorted to prayer for Peter's release, though it is no doubt likely that the authorities themselves were mentioned in the petition.

⁵⁹ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, London (1954) 523.

ministry of the word', verse 4. In a summary statement (14:23) Luke points out that the newly appointed elders in the churches at Derbe, Lystra, Iconium and Pisidian Antioch were commended by prayer and fasting 'to the Lord in whom they believed'. Appointment to and ministry in specific tasks are, according to Luke, bound up with petitionary prayer.

It is important to realize that the acceptance of Gentiles into the plan of God by Peter, representing the Jerusalem church, is due, in the first instance, to revelations given in prayer,⁶⁰ while the pivotal Gentile mission in which the Antioch church played such an important role begins when its members, met together for worship, learn the Holy Spirit's will (13:1ff.). The prayer motif is embedded in the incident of Peter and Cornelius at several levels. Cornelius is not only described as a godfearer who is devout and has given alms to the people of Israel (10:2), but also one who 'prayed constantly to God' (verse 2). Indeed, his prayers and alms are said to have ascended like the smoke from the 'ōlā or the *minhā* to God⁶¹ (10:4). Further, in answer to Cornelius' petition (προσευχή, 10:31)⁶² a vision is given to him. At 3.00 p.m., the hour of the evening oblation (10:3), while Cornelius was at home *praying* (verse 30), an angel of God appeared to him and instructed him to send for Simon Peter who was in Joppa. The following day at noon Peter too, while at prayer (10:9; cf. 11:5) received a vision which ultimately led to his going to Cornelius' house and proclaiming the good news to the centurion and his friends. During Peter's address the Holy Spirit fell on the hearers (10:44). They too, as Gentiles, had been accepted by God and were subsequently baptized.

Later, while the whole Antioch church was at worship with the prophets and teachers carrying out their appointed ministry in the church, the Holy Spirit made known His will to them—probably through the utterance of one of the prophets⁶³ (13:1-3). The two most gifted leaders in the church

⁶⁰ Cf. Greeven, *Gebet*, 122.

⁶¹ The angel's language is full of sacrificial terminology such as is found in Leviticus, e.g. 2:2; Bruce, *Book*, 216.

⁶² Contrary to what many scholars contend προσευχή usually means 'petition' in the New Testament, but, on occasion, it can refer to 'prayer' in a more general sense; so rightly, J. Burnaby, 'Christian Prayer', in *Soundings*, ed. A. R. Vidler, Cambridge (1966) 223f.

⁶³ So many commentators; cf. also E. E. Ellis, 'The Role of the Christian Prophet in Acts', in *Apostolic History and the Gospel. Biblical and Historical Essays*

were to be set apart (verse 2) for a special work to which He had called them. After further fasting and prayer Barnabas and Saul were released for their new service. Acts 13:3 tells us nothing about the prayer of the Antioch church, but at 14:26 as the two missionaries complete their work they return to give an account to those who had commended them to God's grace'.⁶⁴ Thus God's revelation concerning the important Gentile mission was given to a church at prayer; their missionaries had been released with prayer and fasting, and their whole work had been given over to God's grace in prayer.

One further point needs to be added in connection with prayer and the expansion of the church in Acts. If the beginnings of the congregations in the Gentile mission were due to God's activity, and the appointment and commissioning of office-bearers were integrally related to petitionary prayer so that such persons had been commended to God's grace, it was no less true to say that the continuance of these congregations was due to God's gracious help given in answer to petition. Luke, therefore, records that Paul on his journey to Jerusalem met the Ephesian elders and addressed them warning them of the dangers to come (20:17-35, especially 29f.). The apostle then knelt with them and prayed (verse 36). Similarly, after spending seven days with the disciples from Tyre (21:1-6) Paul offered petition on their behalf (verse 5). Luke does not spell out the content of these prayers, but since Paul did not expect to see either congregation again, we shall not be far wrong if we assume he (at 20:36 it is Paul who prays, while at 21:5 the plural 'we' is used) commended them to God's gracious keeping. He who had begun a good work in them was able to bring it to completion on the day of Christ Jesus (Phil. 1:6).

To sum up: 1. Prayer is a significant motif in the Lukan writings as both the terminology and the contexts make plain.

2. Luke presents a full picture of Jesus at prayer, not only because of a biographical or christological interest but also because of a didactic purpose. The distinctively Lukan teaching in the Gospel, and the Third Evangelist's handling of the material common to Matthew and himself underscore this

Presented to F. F. Bruce, ed. W. W. Gasque and R. P. Martin, Exeter (1970) 55-67, especially 62.

⁶⁴ An expression used by Luke to denote the commendation of the missionaries and the work in prayer to God's gracious care and protection: 15:40; *cf.* 14:23.

point. Regular and consistent prayer is inculcated upon the disciples, particularly as a means of overcoming temptation.

3. The evidence of Acts, particularly the summary statements, shows that the early church and its members heeded this injunction to pray without ceasing.

4. But perhaps Luke's central concern in his presentation of this theme is to show that it had an important supporting role in his account of redemptive history, for by it God had guided His people.

Throughout Luke and Acts, persistence in prayer is not a matter of persuading a reluctant God, but rather it is a matter of disciples remaining faithful. In this interval between the "D-Day" of the cross and the "V-Day" of the parousia, not all our prayers are or can be answered. Persistence in prayer is how we remain faithful as we await the eschatological fulfillment of the gospel. Do you want to read the rest of this article? [Request full-text](#). Citations (0). References (0). This research hasn't been cited in any other publications. This research doesn't cite any other publication