

Perspective Digest

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A Trip to Dark Gethsemane: The Ultimate Prayer (Let's Face It)

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This time I intended to delve into the fervent prayers of ancient Israel that are recorded in the Book of Psalms. However,

the anticipation of the International Conference in Jerusalem coupled with the approach of Easter this weekend nudges me instead to contemplate Christ's prayer life. We will consider the Book of Psalms next time. I can't resist Jerusalem!

Let's face it, I relish every square inch of Israel, particularly every moment spent exploring every "nook and cranny" of Jerusalem, the city of Zion. Lately while anticipating the June Bible conference, I find myself recalling the many routes I've traversed throughout Jerusalem. And I've almost convinced myself that I won't need a map this time. The love of the place has so etched its winding streets in my mind that I think I can find my way around though I haven't been there for several years.

With all there is to see in Israel, it's hard to pick favorite sites. One can

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hardly find a spot that isn't vitally linked to biblical history. Yet, if urged to decide, two of the most unforgettable locations for me would probably be the

Sea of Galilee and the Garden of Gethsemane.

I remember thinking—when feeling the first breeze off the Sea of Galilee—"It really exists and it is so beautiful." And I recall reading in *The Desire of Ages* how much of Christ's ministry had been passed near this Sea of Galilee. When the disciples' hearts were filled with terror, and the fierce storm was hurrying them to destruction, Jesus had walked upon the billows to their rescue. Here the tempest had been hushed by His word. Within sight was the beach where above 10,000 persons had been fed from a few small loaves and fishes. Not far distant was Capernaum, the

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scene of so many miracles (*The Desire of Ages*, p. 809).

I have never tired of wandering the beaches and hillsides of Galilee, not only because of their beauty and serenity, but also because of the many connections with Christ's life there.

Drawn to the Garden

For different reasons I always find myself drawn to the Garden of Gethsemane. The ancient olive trees with their welcome shade during the day and lengthy shadows at dusk compel me to recall Christ's ultimate prayer. That prayer where He sweat blood. It makes me shudder whenever I read Ellen White's graphic portrayal of that fateful hour.

Near the entrance to the garden, Jesus left all but three of the disciples, bidding them pray for themselves and for Him. "Tarry ye here," He said, "and watch with me" (Matt. 26: 38, KJV).

"He went a little distance from them—not so far but that they could both see and hear Him—and fell prostrate upon the ground. . . . Christ was suffering under divine justice. He saw what justice meant. Hitherto He had been as an intercessor for others; now He longed to have an intercessor for Himself. . . . The disciples awakened at the voice of Jesus, but they hardly knew Him, His face was so changed by anguish. . . . Again the Son of God was seized with superhuman agony, and fainting and exhausted,

He staggered back to the place of His former struggle. His suffering was even greater than before. As the agony of soul came upon Him, 'His sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground'. . .

"A short time before, Jesus had stood like a mightily cedar, withstanding the storm of opposition that spent its fury upon Him. . . . Now had come the hour of the power of darkness. . . . and [He] fell prostrate, overcome by the horror of a great darkness. The humanity of the Son of God trembled in that trying hour. He prayed not now for His disciples that their faith might not fail, but for His own tempted, agonized soul. The awful moment had come . . . which was to decide the destiny of the world. The fate of humanity trembled in the balance. . . . The words fall tremblingly from the pale lips of Jesus, 'O My Father, if this cup may not pass away from Me, except I drink it, Thy will be done'. . .

The Crowning Sacrifice

"Three times has He uttered that prayer. Three times has humanity shrunk from the last, crowning sacrifice. But now the history of the human race comes up before the world's Redeemer. . . . He will not turn from His mission. He will become the propitiation of a race that has willed to sin. . . . Having made the decision, He fell dying to the ground from which He had par-

tially risen" (*The Desire of Ages*, pp. 686-693).

When studying the Atonement, the focal point of which is the crucifixion, we must never pass lightly over Gethsemane. It is here where Christ won the battle. It is here where He prayed the hardest of all prayers: "O my Father, if this cup may not pass away from Me, except I drink it, thy will be done" (vs. 42). His whole being recoiled from the idea of death, divine justice, and separation from His father. The excruciating struggle wrung blood from His brow. However, though it almost killed Him there in Gethsemane, He sobbed, clutching the ground, "O my Father, thy will be done."

Prayer: A Divine Slot Machine?

Of the many lessons we need to learn from Gethsemane, seeing God praying to God this way, ranks first. It forces us to a deeper understanding of what prayer really is. Prayer is not like a divine slot machine where we put something in and automatically get something out. It is not a magical device. It is not offering advice to God to assist Him in helping us. Even worse would be to believe that those who get what they pray for are closer to God or have more faith than the rest of us. The refused prayer of Christ in Gethsemane is answer enough to that notion.

Prayer—if we have the courage to watch Jesus pray in Gethsemane—

seems to be more a process of committing ourselves completely to God. Like Christ, we need to wrestle with ourselves and cry after God until we have the victory. By studying Christ's atonement we can learn how to truly pray:

"The theme of redemption is one that the angels desire to look into; it will be the science and the song of the redeemed throughout the ceaseless ages of eternity. Is it not worthy of careful thought and study now? The infinite mercy and love of Jesus, the sacrifice made in our behalf, call for the most serious and solemn reflection. . . . As we thus contemplate heavenly themes, our faith and love will grow stronger, and our prayers will be more and more acceptable to God, because they will be more and more mixed with faith and love. They will be intelligent and fervent" (*Steps to Christ*, pp. 88, 89).

Whenever I go to Israel, one of the first places I am always drawn to is the Mount of Olives. In the garden there, hallowed with His blood, as was the cross, Jesus not only made the decision to die for this world, but He also taught us how to pray. James Montgomery captures this compelling concept in his hymn:

"Go to dark Gethsemane,
Ye that feel the tempter's power;
Your Redeemer's conflict see;
Watch with Him one bitter hour;
Turn not from His griefs away;
Learn of Jesus Christ to pray." □