
Luke's Invitation to a Life of Prayer

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The word “pray” generally means to entreat and implore. It connotes asking for something in a humble manner while recognizing that the one entreated has the right to grant or deny the petition. As Robert C. Tannehill aptly states, “[p]rayer is an appeal to a higher power.”¹ This notion is not inevitably religious, but it is deeply spiritual for people of faith. As Don E. Saliers explains, “there are possible definitions of prayer which do not refer to God. But the concept of praying with which Christian theology must reckon requires a self-involving relationship to God as its very essence. Prayer is always *to* God and in dialogue *with* God, or it is not biblical.”²

Prayer saturates the Bible. Among other things, religious people are commonly depicted petitioning God. For instance, David, a man after God’s own heart (Acts 13:22; 1 Sam 13:14), prays morning, noon, and night (Ps 55:17). Similarly, Daniel, who has an “excellent spirit” (Dan 5:12; 6:3), customarily prays at least three times daily (Dan 6:10).³ In light of these examples and others that could be cited, it is striking that Ruben A. Torrey laments, “[p]rayerlessness abounds among church members on every hand. Some one has said that Christians on the average do not spend more than 5 minutes a day in prayer.”⁴

If a Christian wants to learn more about prayer, perhaps to strengthen his or her own spiritual life, some biblical texts are more robust resources than others. For instance, one can find many examples in the Book of Psalms. In the New Testament (NT), Luke’s writings—the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts—contain “rich and unique” content on the matter.⁵ In each volume, “prayer as a communing with God is a mark of Christian discipleship.”⁶ Among other texts, readers can enhance their self-involving relationships with God by studying Luke-Acts. Together,

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Prayer as a Lukan theme

Luke’s writings are valuable sources on prayer because he discusses the subject more than any other NT author. Forms of *proseuchomai* (“pray”) and *proseuchē* (“prayer”) occur forty-seven times in Luke-Acts (twenty-two times in the Gospel), compared to just seventeen times in Matthew, twelve times in Mark, zero times in John, thirty-three times in Paul’s epistles, and three other times in the NT. Forms of *deomai* (“pray” or “make a request”) and the corresponding noun *deēsis* (“prayer” or “request”) appear thirty-four times in the NT—ten times in Paul’s letters and nineteen times in Luke-Acts.

While the sheer volume of Luke’s references to prayer is impressive, numbers do not tell the whole tale. Since his corpus is the largest in the NT, it stands to reason that he might use certain words more often than other NT writers. Yet, much of the material is uniquely Lukan since Acts is the only canonical chronicle of the nascent church and many of the prayer texts in the Third Gospel are unparalleled in Matthew, Mark, and John.

Some scholars suggest there may be no single purpose or theme in Luke-Acts.⁷ However, the central theme might fairly be summa-

1. Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1990), 2:126.

2. Don E. Saliers, “Prayer and the Doctrine of God in Contemporary Theology,” *Int* 34.3 (1980): 266.

3. Bible quotations are from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

4. Ruben A. Torrey, *How to Pray* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1945), 104.

5. Kyu Sam Han, “Theology of Prayer in the Gospel of Luke,” *JETS* 43.4 (2000): 675.

6. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles*, AB 31 (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 215.

7. Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, NAC 24 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 35; Helmut Koester, *History and Literature of Early Christianity*

alized as God bringing salvation to all people through Jesus Christ and the continuing mission of his disciples.⁸ In developing this general premise, the writer explores several subsidiary themes and potentially pursues multiple goals.⁹ The concept of prayer is interwoven throughout his account, literally from beginning to end.

The prominence of prayer is evident in the opening chapters of each volume. In the first scene of the Third Gospel, Zechariah is serving in the temple at Jerusalem while “the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense” (Luke 1:10). The angel Gabriel appears to him and affirms that Zechariah’s prayer was heard; he and his wife, Elizabeth, will have a son, John, despite their old age (1:13–20). In chapter 2, when Jesus is dedicated at the temple, Simeon lifts him up and offers a prayer of thanksgiving (2:25–32). Then Anna the prophetess, who is described as “worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day,” also thanks God and praises him to others (2:36–38).

The thematic emphasis is also introduced early in Acts. In the first chapter, the apostles dedicate themselves to prayer along with “the women” and Jesus’ family (Acts 1:13–14), and they petition the Lord while selecting Matthias to replace Judas (1:23–26). The second chapter closes with a summary of life in the early church that describes new believers devoting themselves to, among other things, prayer along with the apostles (2:42). The opening chapters of Luke and Acts introduce prayer as one of Luke’s great themes in each volume.

Jesus’ example and instruction

For Luke, the beginning and end of Jesus’ life and ministry are steeped in prayer. If the Third Gospel’s primary audience is Gentile Christians, as scholars generally suppose, then Jesus’ life and teachings invite those first readers to follow Jesus in their own lives of prayer.

Jesus models a life of prayer

Each Gospel offers insight into Jesus’ prayer life, but Luke provides a fuller picture than the others.¹⁰ “The Second Evangelist shows little interest in the subject,” according to P. T. O’Brien, and “Matthew does not have the systematic interest in prayer that marks out the Third Evangelist.”¹¹ Luke introduces prayer as a crucial theme in his Gospel, then quickly focuses the motif through Jesus’ life. As Geir Otto Holmas explains,

From Lk. 3 onwards, the prayer theme is developed in a new mode and with a marked shift of emphasis. The

(New York: de Gruyter, 1982), 310–311.

8. Paul J. Achtemeier, Joel B. Green, and Marianne Meye Thompson, *Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 149–150; Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts*, vol. 5 of *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 26.

9. Carl R. Holladay, *Acts*, NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2016), 48–67.

10. P. T. O’Brien, “Prayer in Luke-Acts,” *TynBul* 24 (1973): 120.

11. O’Brien, “Prayer in Luke-Acts,” 116.

Luke especially depicts Jesus praying before major ministry decisions and developments. Matthew and Mark acknowledge that Jesus withdraws on an occasion to pray privately (Matt 14:23; Mark 1:35). Luke, though, indicates that Jesus did this regularly.

portrait of prayer as an activity distinctive to pious and expectant Israelites in the Jerusalem temple now gives way for the significance of prayer in the life and ministry of Jesus. In the remainder of Luke’s Gospel, the spotlight is exclusively on the role of prayer in Jesus’ mission in terms of his strong personal commitment to seek communion with God and in terms of his modelling of prayer to the disciples in word and deed.¹²

Luke’s readers must recognize the significance of prayer, but it is imperative for Luke that they view it through the prism of Jesus’ example.

The Third Gospel depicts Jesus praying more frequently than the others and provides unique windows into Jesus’ life of prayer. Even where Luke describes events Matthew and Mark also discuss, he sometimes relates Jesus’ petitions to the events when other Evangelists do not. For instance, Matthew 3:13–17 and Mark 1:9–11 record Jesus’ baptism, but only Luke says Jesus is praying after his baptism when the Holy Spirit descends upon him (Luke 3:21–22). Thus, only Luke notes that Jesus prays before being tempted in the wilderness and beginning his public ministry.

Luke especially depicts Jesus praying before major ministry decisions and developments.¹³ Matthew and Mark acknowledge that Jesus withdraws on an occasion to pray privately (Matt 14:23; Mark 1:35). Luke, though, indicates that Jesus did this regularly. “But now even more the report about him went abroad, and great crowds gathered to hear him and to be healed of their infirmities,” says Luke, “But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray” (Luke 5:15–16).¹⁴ This statement comes just before Jesus faces rapidly escalating opposition from the scribes and Pharisees (see Luke 5:21, 30; 6:2, 7, 11).¹⁵ After a series of clashes with Jewish leaders, Jesus goes to a mountain to select his apostles (cf. Matt

12. Geir Otto Holmas, *Prayer and Vindication in Luke-Acts: The Theme of Prayer within the Context of the Legitimizing and Edifying Objective of the Lukan Narrative* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 77.

13. Lindell O. Harris, “Prayer in the Gospel of Luke,” *SwJT* 10.1 (1967): 60.

14. Han, “Theology of Prayer,” 681.

15. Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50, BECNT* 3A (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 478.

10:1–4; Mark 3:13–19). Only Luke reports that Jesus supplicates all night before making the selection (Luke 6:12–16).¹⁶

Luke consistently connects Jesus' petitions with pivotal moments in his ministry. For instance, Matthew 16:13–20 includes an extended account of Peter's declaration that Jesus is the Christ of God, but only Luke states that Jesus prays alone before asking the question that prompts Peter's words (Luke 9:18–20). Similarly, Matthew 17:1–2 and Mark 9:2–3 describe Jesus' transfiguration before Peter, James, and John. The other Synoptists note that this occurs on a high mountain (Matt 17:1–2; Mark 9:2). Yet, only Luke reveals that Jesus takes the three onto the mountain specifically to pray and is praying when his appearance changes (Luke 9:28–29). His petitions are followed by appearances from Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus about his death at Jerusalem (Luke 9:30–31). In the Third Gospel, Jesus seeks communion with God as he steels himself for the way of suffering.¹⁷

After a lengthy midsection chronicling Jesus' travel to Jerusalem, Luke shows the centrality of prayer in the final hours before Jesus dies. Before his arrest, he gives thanks while instituting the Lord's Supper (Luke 22:15–19), prays that Peter's faith will not fail (22:31–34), and kneels and prays earnestly on the Mount of Olives (22:41–45).¹⁸ Jesus even utters two prayers—recorded only by Luke—while hanging on the cross, one for his enemies and one committing his spirit to the Father (23:34, 46).

The Lukan Jesus is a man of prayer. He prays before beginning his ministry, engaging in conflicts with opponents, selecting his apostles, and eliciting Peter's confession. He prays when facing the prospect of death and as he expires on the cross. As Lindell O. Harris explains, "Jesus felt his own need of prayer. He gained strength from prayer. Prayer enabled him to live a life of unclouded communion with God. Prayer brought the Father's will into clear focus."¹⁹ By underscoring the centrality of prayer in Jesus' life, Luke presents Jesus as an example for all who read the Third Gospel.²⁰

Jesus encourages lives of prayer

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus' priority and constancy in prayer influence

16. "[W]here Mark suggests that Jesus went away simply to avoid the crowds, Luke has no doubt correctly seen the positive point that his purpose in seeking loneliness was in order to pray." I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 210. "Certainly he was not uttering petitions all the time or continually speaking words. He was revealing what prayer can be in its greatest intensity: an undistracted listening to God" (Harris, "Prayer in the Gospel of Luke," 61).

17. Harris, "Prayer in the Gospel of Luke," 62.

18. The other Evangelists describe Jesus foretelling Peter's denial, but only Luke includes Jesus' statement about praying for Peter (see Matt 26:30–35; Mark 14:26–31; John 13:36–38).

19. Harris, "Prayer in the Gospel of Luke," 69.

20. "[F]ew readers will have failed to recognize the greater frequency of situations in which Jesus is shown praying in Luke's account. This not only sets a certain tone but also reveals an important dimension of Jesus' relationship with God the Father and models this means of relationship for his followers." David Lyle Jeffrey, *Luke*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2012), 5.

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his disciples. Luke 11:2–4 contains only a shortened version of the model prayer recorded in Matthew 6:5–14.²¹ However, Luke adds an important prelude to the model: "Now Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples'" (Luke 11:1). In the Third Gospel, the content of the model is secondary. Jesus' example stokes a desire in his disciples for closer communion with God and inspires them to seek guidance from their teacher.²²

Luke shares several other passages where Jesus teaches his disciples about prayer. For instance, Jesus instructs them to pray for their abusers (Luke 6:28). The travel narrative section, which gives more attention to Jesus' teaching than his example, contains the most striking didactic passages, including three distinctly Lukan parables—the Friend at Midnight (11:5–13), the Persistent Widow (18:1–8), and the Publican and the Pharisee (18:9–14). The first two encourage confident persistence in prayer based on God's loving character, and the third teaches humility in approaching God.

More than the other Evangelists, Luke offers a multi-dimensional portrait of Jesus. In Luke's first volume, Jesus is devoted to prayer, and he calls others to similar devotion. Disciples notice his commitment and begin to emulate it. Luke's second volume describes the extent of their imitation in the early decades following Jesus' ascension.

Early disciples follow Jesus' example and instruction

As Jesus models and encourages prayer in the Third Gospel, disciples emulate him and employ his teachings in the Book of Acts. According to Holmas, "[g]iving an idealized depiction of the prayers of the early believers, the Acts account is clearly designed to emphasize that their practice of prayer conformed

21. "The form of the prayer as given in Luke is shorter than the prayer in Matthew (6:9-13), but the substance is very similar" (Harris, "Prayer in the Gospel of Luke," 65).

22. "The disciples, struck by Jesus' constant example in this Gospel, desire to commune with God as their master does." Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X–XXIV*, AB 28A (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1985), 902.

to the pattern and precept of Jesus as described in the Gospel.²³ This design includes strong parallels in the frequency, occasions, and content of prayers.²⁴

General persistence

Jesus is a man of prayer in Luke's Gospel, and early Christians in the Book of Acts are, individually and collectively, people of prayer.²⁵ Divine supplication is the disciples' first corporate action following Jesus' ascension (Acts 1:14). When the number of believers explodes on Pentecost, the community is characterized as much by persistent prayer as the apostles' preaching (2:42; 6:4).²⁶ Carl Holladay explains, "[p]rayer typifies the Christian community in Acts, which replicates the practice of Jesus."²⁷ Constancy in prayer, which symbolizes the community's reliance upon God, is especially integral in the ministries of early leaders such as Peter and Paul.

Peter is the central human figure in the first part of Acts. He and John go to the Jewish temple at the hour of prayer (Acts 3:1). Later, the pair prays for new disciples in Samaria (8:14–16), and Peter admonishes Simon to repent and petition the Lord for forgiveness (8:20–22). In Joppa, Peter kneels and supplicates before raising Dorcas (9:40).²⁸ Subsequently, as Jesus seeks private times of communion with God in Luke's Gospel (9:28; 22:39–46), Peter goes onto a housetop to pray in Acts (10:9). This occasion of private prayer is a prelude to his preaching to gentiles (11:3–8), and possibly the first gentile convert, Cornelius, is primarily distinguished by his continual prayers (10:2, 4, 30–31).²⁹

Persistent petitions also characterize the life and ministry of Paul, the most prominent figure in the church's gentile expansion. After meeting Jesus, he fasts for three days and prays (Acts 9:9, 11). During the apostle's mission in Philippi, he and his companions seek suitable environs for their supplications (16:13, 16). When

23. Holmas, *Prayer and Vindication*, 161.

24. "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 and its individual members, 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 (O'Brien, "Prayer in Luke-Acts," 121–122).

25. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Acts*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), 76.

26. "Genuine prayerfulness is a distinguishing attribute of the Jerusalem community and its leading personalities" (Holmas, *Prayer and Vindication*, 165).

27. Holladay, *Acts*, 109.

28. Jesus kneels while praying in the garden (Luke 22:41), and kneeling is a common posture for prayer among disciples in Acts (7:60; 9:40; 20:36; 21:5).

29. Some scholars suspect the eunuch of Ethiopia in Acts 8 is actually the first gentile converted to Christianity rather than Cornelius. See, e.g., Steve Walton, *Reading Acts Theologically*, LNTS 661 (London: T&T Clark, 2022), 95; F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary*, 3d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 226; Tannehill, *Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, 2:109. However, other scholars do not identify the eunuch as a gentile. Margaret Aymer, for instance, acknowledges the most common view holds the eunuch is a gentile but argues he is a diaspora Jew. Aymer, "Exotica and the Ethiopian of Acts 8:26–40: Toward a Different Fabula," *JBL* 142.3 (2023): 533–534.

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he and Silas are beaten and jailed in the city, they sing and pray with their feet fastened in stocks (16:22–24). Later, Paul kneels and prays with the Ephesian elders before parting company with them, potentially for the last time (20:36). He does the same with disciples at Tyre (21:5–6). Prayer persists in Jesus' community and among its leaders, just as it does in his life.³⁰

Arrival of the Spirit

In the Lukan corpus, prayer is a typical prelude to the Holy Spirit's arrival. The account of the Spirit's descent upon Jesus after his baptism initiates a pattern.³¹ His followers are also praying when the Spirit arrives on Pentecost.³² Prior to Jesus' ascension, he promises the Spirit will come and empower the apostles to act as his witnesses (Acts 1:8). They wait and pray with others in anticipation (1:14).³³ In response to their prayers and in close correspondence to the beginning of Jesus' mission, the Spirit falls and empowers the apostles' preaching (2:1–4).³⁴

Prayer expressly precedes arrival of the Spirit on three other occasions in Acts. First, after the Sanhedrin questions and releases Peter and John, the pair gathers with other disciples, reports the council's injunction on preaching Jesus, and petitions God for boldness (4:23–30). They are then filled with the Holy Spirit and continue preaching boldly (4:31). Second, when the gospel spreads to Samaria, Peter and John pray for the new believers and lay hands on them before the Spirit descends again (8:14–17). Finally, while prayer does not immediately precede the Spirit's

30. "[D]edicated prayer remains a distinguishing feature of the messianic community and its major representatives" (Holmas, *Prayer and Vindication*, 161).

31. O'Brien, "Prayer in Luke-Acts," 114.

32. "The group's solidarity is expressed by their single-minded devotion to prayer. Just as Jesus was in solitary prayer after his baptism and before the Holy Spirit descended on him 'in bodily form like a dove' (Luke 3:21–22), so do his followers pray earnestly prior to their reception of the Holy Spirit" (Holladay, *Acts*, 78–9). "[T]he community's prayer of expectation (of the coming baptism with the Spirit) parallels that of Jesus before his baptism in Luke 3:21" (Fitzmyer, *Acts*, 215). "As with Jesus' prayers in Luke, the prayer of the community in Acts 1:14 is preparation for an important new development" (Tannehill, *Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, 2:19).

33. "They had not been commanded to pray, only to wait. But Jesus' own example at his baptism and his teachings, especially regarding how the Spirit would come in response to prayer, probably provided enough guidance (Lk 3:21; 11:13; 18:1, 8)." William J. Larkin Jr., *Acts* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 44.

34. Tannehill, *Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, 2:29.

arrival at Cornelius's home, petitions by Cornelius and Peter are definite precursors to the event (10:2, 4, 9, 30–31; 11:5).³⁵

New leaders and missions

In Luke-Acts, a pattern of petitioning God when appointing new leaders and embarking on new missions also begins with Jesus. Only Luke notes that Jesus prays as he is anointed with the Holy Spirit following his baptism (Luke 3:21–22a). Baptism, prayer, anointing of the Spirit, and verbal affirmation from heaven confirm his Messianic appointment.³⁶ Darrell L. Bock explains, “[t]he prayer adds solemnity to the setting as if Jesus knows he is about to embark on his mission.”³⁷ Jesus subsequently prays before selecting his twelve apostles (6:12–16). By specifying that he prays all night on this occasion, the Third Gospel highlights the gravity of the decision and the need for divine involvement. Jesus’ prayers before beginning his ministry and before appointing disciples to special roles in his ministry set a precedent in Luke-Acts.

Disciples in the nascent Jerusalem church follow Jesus’ example. The first specific prayer in Acts is a request for guidance in selecting an apostolic replacement for Judas Iscariot (Acts 1:24–26).³⁸ Later, when the Seven are chosen—in part, so the apostles can focus on prayer and teaching—the community prays and lays hands on them while commissioning them to care for the Hellenist widows (6:1–6).³⁹ Selecting leaders is not strictly political in Luke-Acts. As O’Brien rightly affirms, “[a]ppointment to and ministry in specific tasks are, according to Luke, bound up with petitionary prayer.”⁴⁰

The pattern initiated by Jesus and followed at Jerusalem is also evident in Paul’s life and ministry. Paul is praying when Jesus dispatches Ananias and reveals the scope of Paul’s future ministry (Acts 9:11–16). Subsequently, Christians in Antioch fast and pray before laying hands on Paul and Barnabas and sending them off into a new phase of missionary work (13:1–3). The correspondence with earlier scenes leads Tannehill to affirm “[t]he mission journey of Paul and Barnabas, like the missions of Jesus and the apostles, is born out of the searching and alertness of prayer and is empowered by the Spirit.”⁴¹ Having begun their journey this way, it is no surprise that Paul and Barnabas pray and fast while appointing elders in all the churches (14:23).

35. Prayer is potentially, if not likely, involved with Paul laying hands on disciples in Ephesus, but Luke does not state this directly (Acts 19:1–6; cf. 8:15–17).

36. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 150; Stein, *Luke*, 322.

37. Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50*, 337.

38. “The implication is that they realize that the decision does not lie with them as to who will replace Judas, just as they had nothing to say about the selection of the original Twelve. They pray for God’s choice in this matter” (Fitzmyer, *Acts*, 227).

39. “[I]t is notable here that it is not simply the apostles who prayed and laid hands on them, in spite of what most English versions say. Rather, the Greek is most naturally read as portraying the whole group laying hands on and praying for the seven.” Steve Walton, *Reading Acts Theologically*, 95.

40. O’Brien, “Prayer in Luke-Acts,” 125.

41. Tannehill, *Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, 2:161.

Prayer is an essential aspect of the church’s response to troubles of various kinds—just as it is a critical element of Jesus’ response. Among other things, their entreaties show they emulate Jesus’ dependence on the Father’s sovereignty.

Facing various trials

Jesus acknowledges, in both doctrine and practice, God’s sovereignty during times of severe testing. His understanding manifests, among other ways, in prayer. In Luke 5:16, Jesus communes privately with God before clashes with Jewish opponents. He also prays repeatedly and earnestly before his arrest (Luke 22:41–44). On the former occasion, Jesus twice tells the apostles to pray they do not enter into temptation themselves (22:40, 45–46), an instruction that pointedly reiterates a portion of his model prayer (11:4).

Luke’s second volume shows the disciples following his example and instruction by petitioning God regarding their challenges and trials.⁴² For instance, when Peter and John are released by the Sanhedrin, they gather with others and pray, acknowledging God’s sovereignty and asking for boldness to continue preaching (Acts 4:23–31).⁴³ The group also asks God to look upon the threats of the Jewish leaders, implying he will notice the community’s troubles and intervene (4:29).⁴⁴ Later, Stephen prays while being murdered in apparent mob action (7:59–60). After Herod kills James and imprisons Peter, the church supplicates for Peter’s deliverance (12:5, 12). Paul and Silas pray while jailed at Philippi (16:25). When Paul sails to Rome, the ship encounters turbulence, and the passengers respond by praying (27:29).

Luke shows Jesus’ disciples mimicking their teacher in myriad ways, including their responses to opposition and trials. According to some scholars, “[i]t is especially here that Luke indicates how Jesus’ followers have taken on the character of their leader.”⁴⁵ Prayer is an essential aspect of the church’s response to troubles of various kinds—just as it is a critical element of Jesus’ response. Among other things, their entreaties show they emulate Jesus’ dependence on the Father’s sovereignty.

42. “Prayer is common in Acts at difficult moments” (Bock, *Acts*, 540).

43. Their petition is arguably a response to Jesus’ instruction in Luke 22:39–46 that they pray not to enter into temptation. Tannehill, *Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, 2:71–72.

44. Schnabel, *Acts*, 257–58.

45. Achtemeier, Green, and Thompson, *Introducing the New Testament*, 253.

Approaching death

Stephen's stoning in Acts 7 occasions one of the most poignant instances of a Christian following Jesus' example in the Lukan corpus. Jesus instructs disciples to pray for their persecutors (Luke 6:28), and he models this message while languishing on the cross. His intense devotion to prayer in life reaches its climax as he dies. In this respect, the Third Gospel "presents [Jesus] ideally as one unswervingly seeking communion with God even in [the] face of disgrace and suffering, trusting in God's readiness to vindicate him."⁴⁶

Stephen subsequently appears before the Jerusalem Sanhedrin—the same body responsible for Jesus' prosecution and death—and the proceedings again culminate in execution. While Stephen is dying, he responds much like Jesus. According to Luke, Jesus' first words on the cross are, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). This is the "direct antecedent" to one of Stephen's petitions.⁴⁷ While being stoned, he falls to his knees and loudly prays, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (Acts 7:60).⁴⁸

The deaths of Jesus and Stephen are also similar because each man prays for reception of his spirit before dying. Luke reports Jesus' final words as "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" (Luke 23:46). Similarly, Stephen calls out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" (Acts 7:59). Stephen directs his petition to Jesus rather than the Father. Still, the correspondence in sentiment and circumstance are unmistakable. Hence, each of Stephen's dying petitions parallels prayers uniquely attributed by Luke to Jesus on the cross.⁴⁹ Calvin calls this mimicry "a rare example of a man dying in a godly and holy way."⁵⁰

Luke is unique among NT authors because he offers two paradigms for helping readers follow Jesus; Jesus is a model in Luke's first volume, and Jesus' disciples are models in the second. Jesus lives and dies in prayer in the Gospel. Early disciples, following his example and instruction, live and die in prayer in Acts.

The purpose of Luke's emphasis on prayer

Many scholars note the prominence of prayer in the Lukan corpus. However, "the exemplary function of Jesus' prayer in Luke-Acts cannot be perceived adequately simply by noting these traits or by making an inventory of the parallels between narrative prayer references and Jesus' instruction on prayer or correspondences between Jesus' prayers in the Gospel and those of the believers in Acts."⁵¹ Readers must consider the relationship between Jesus' life

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and doctrine and the early church's practices in order to grasp the effect of Luke's references.⁵² This effect is a key indicator of the writer's intended purpose.

In Luke's first volume, Jesus relies on prayer while accomplishing the Father's mission and calls others to do the same.⁵³ "It is in regard to these emphases," says Harris, "that Luke's Gospel has its richest and fullest teachings on prayer."⁵⁴ Hinson explains, "Luke did not want his readers to miss his basic conviction about the centrality of persistence in prayer to the success of the universal mission of Christianity pursued so urgently in expectation of the consummation of the age. The most effective way for him to achieve that was to link it to Jesus himself—to his teaching and, even more, to his example."⁵⁵

Luke's focus on prayer continues in Acts, where he pursues the theme differently. Unlike the first volume, the second has no direct instructions on prayer or exhortations to pray. Acts simply shows that Jesus' example and teaching have the intended effect on the primitive church. Christian leaders and communities follow Jesus into lives of reliance on God and earnest prayer. This indispensable element of advancing God's mission becomes "the church's very life-breath."⁵⁶

52. "[I]f our purpose is ... to explore a particular theme in the context of Luke's literary aims and objectives, I believe approaching the Gospel and Acts as a diptych and a sequential whole is to be preferred, indeed required. Even if the Third Gospel can be meaningfully interpreted on its own, Luke's narration anticipates a continuation in Acts which is material to the Gospel's plan and purpose. Maybe more importantly still, Luke's Gospel contains much information which is necessary for a profound understanding of the account in Acts, its sequel" (Holmas, *Prayer and Vindication*, 160).

53. "Luke's elaboration of the theme of prayer in Lk. 3–24 has two distinct foci: (a) the narrative portrait of Jesus as a man devoted to prayer throughout his ministry; and (b) the didactic concern underlying Jesus' repeated efforts to instruct his disciples regarding the importance of prayer" (Holmas, *Prayer and Vindication*, 77).

54. Harris, "Prayer in the Gospel of Luke," 60.

55. E. Glenn Hinson, "Persistence in Prayer in Luke-Acts," *Rev-Exp* 104.4 (2007): 722.

56. Larkin Jr., *Acts*, 17.

46. Holmas, *Prayer and Vindication*, 83.

47. Shelly Matthews, "Clemency as Cruelty: Forgiveness and Force in the Dying Prayers of Jesus and Stephen," *BibInt* 17.1–2 (2009): 121.

48. This is "a clear allusion to the dying forgiveness prayer of the Lukan Jesus from the cross." Matthews, "Clemency as Cruelty," 118–119.

49. Tannehill, *Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, 2:99.

50. John Calvin, *The Acts of the Apostles 1–13*, trans. John W. Fraser and W. J. G. McDonald (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 221.

51. Holmas, *Prayer and Vindication*, 83.

Luke's frequent and unique insights into Jesus' prayers and teachings, together with their influence on his disciples, suggest that the ideals are not to be grasped in principle only. It is not enough for Luke's readers merely to recognize the virtue of prayer. He edits his sources in a way that calls readers to develop their own self-involving relationships with God facilitated largely by prayer.⁵⁷ Supplications do not need to be long or glamorous (Luke 20:45–47). They should, however, be persistent and sincere. Such prayers facilitate empowerment by the Holy Spirit, selecting new leaders, expanding participation in God's mission, overcoming opposition and trials, and even approaching death as a faithful follower of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

Luke discusses prayer more than any other writer in the NT and depicts the spiritual discipline as essential to the success of Jesus and the early church. The Gospel of Luke presents Jesus' example and instruction, and the Book of Acts shows the degree to which early disciples follow him in prayer. This emphasis is oft-discussed, but the ramifications for readers are rarely pursued. The design of Luke's corpus implies that reliance on God with corresponding supplication is vital to individual and corporate success in executing God's mission in readers' own times and circumstances.

Modern readers should give careful attention to depictions of prayer in Luke-Acts. Luke does not include them as mere

Luke's focus on prayer continues in Acts, where he pursues the theme differently. Unlike the first volume, the second has no direct instructions on prayer or exhortations to pray. Acts simply shows that Jesus' example and teaching have the intended effect on the primitive church.

data points. He intentionally crafts his corpus to provide readers with unparalleled details regarding Jesus' teachings on prayer, its centrality in his life, and his influence on the prayer lives of his disciples. In so doing, Luke invites readers to continue his narrative in their personal contexts. By following Jesus and the primitive church into lives saturated with private and communal prayer, Luke's readers may still enhance their intimate, self-involving relationships with God.

57. "The Lukan teaching on prayer emphasizes the need to engage in this activity continuously, and that for spiritual ends" (O'Brien, "Prayer in Luke-Acts," 121).