

The Jesus of Luke: A Man of Prayer

by Ronald W. Graham

The sermon explores the significance of Jesus as a man of prayer, emphasizing his dual nature and the importance of prayer in the life of believers.

Scripture: Luke 2:52, Luke 11:1, Luke 22:32, Luke 22:42, Luke 23:34

Topics: "Jesus Christ", "Prayer Life"

Description

Ronald W. Graham preaches about 'The Jesus of Luke: A Man of Prayer,' exploring the facets of Jesus as both truly God and truly man. He delves into the church's confession of Jesus' divinity and humanity, emphasizing Jesus' unique works and personhood. The sermon highlights various instances in the Gospel of Luke where Jesus is portrayed as a man of prayer, showcasing his dependence on God, self-giving love, and commitment to God's will. The conclusion reflects on the significance of prayer in Jesus' life, emphasizing the importance of worship, daily sustenance, forgiveness, and seeking God's guidance in times of trial.

Transcript

"He was praying in a certain place, and when he ceased, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray'" (Luke 11:1).

Introduction

I should like to speak this evening about The Jesus of Luke: A Man of Prayer. First of all, we shall consider some facets of the church's classic confession about Jesus, namely that he was "truly God, truly man."1 This as the context for viewing Luke's portrayal of Jesus as a religious person.

Second, we shall look at every passage in the third Gospel that presents Jesus as a man of prayer. We shall be looking at those that include proseuchomai, "to offer prayers," "to make vows," "to worship," proseuche, "prayer," deo "to ask for [a thing] from [someone]," "to beg [a person] to do [something]," "to beseech," and deesis, "a prayer," "an entreaty," "an asking," "a beseeching."

From time to time we shall have to glance across at Matthew and Mark, because without that contrast, we cannot appreciate the nuances of what Luke has to say about Jesus as a man of prayer.

Third, we shall draw four conclusions to our study.

1. "Truly God, truly man"

The church has long defined the significance of Jesus of Nazareth in terms of "truly God, truly man." In doing so, it has found that it has had two tasks of major proportions on its hands. One has been to define what is meant by the "godness" of Jesus; the other has been to keep Jesus fully human.

a. The godness of Jesus

Let us begin with the godness of Jesus.

The godness of Jesus has traditionally been defined in either or both of two ways: he is unique in his person; he is unique in his works.

One answer to the question of his godness is that he did what no other person has done: he performed miracles, he was crucified for our sins, he was raised from the dead. A second answer to that question is that he was what no other person has been: he was the Son of God, he was born of the Virgin Mary, he lived out his life sinlessly.

Sometimes "truly God" has been interpreted as meaning that Jesus is totally and absolutely other than what we are and also that he exhausts the being of God--there is no more to God than what we have seen and experienced in Jesus Christ. That interpretation is not without some problems. These are some others that the church's thinkers have put their fingers on:

- 1) Jesus is not the only one for whom the performance of miracles has been claimed.
- 2) It was not the fact that Jesus died but the fact that it was Jesus of Nazareth who died that was significant. Two others were crucified with him that day and their deaths are not remembered as

important. We are therefore dealing with the moral significance of the central man who was crucified.

- 3) Jesus is not the only one in the Bible designated as a "son of God," though he is the one described as the "only" 'Son of God,' that is, Son of God in some special way. The question is, What way?

- 4) Virgin birth has been claimed for others than Jesus in the course of human history.

- 5) Jesus' sinlessness is difficult to prove. Easy enough to claim, hard to prove. Paul in one place, the writer of First Peter in another, and the author of Hebrews in yet another² make the claim that Jesus was sinless, but the claim does not make him so. Only God could know for sure whether Jesus was in fact sinless. Among other things, sinlessness has to do with the secret places of the heart. Furthermore, none of these writers seeks to back up his claim.

Whatever sinlessness might mean, it did not signify, according to the Evangelists, that Jesus was not tempted to sin nor did it mean that he was incapable of sinning.

In addition, what the Evangelists do depict is not something negative, sinlessness, the absence of sin, but something positive, goodness. As the Peter of Acts puts it to Cornelius, there was in Jesus of Nazareth an unquenchable "energy of goodness."³ That was why he spent his life "going about, doing good."

6) Whatever the resurrection of Jesus may mean, it cannot signify something of worth that he did. "God raised him from the dead" is the way the writers of the Testament account for that surprising event.

Furthermore, the Evangelists nowhere portray Jesus as making divine choices one day and human choices another, as thinking like God in some

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circumstances but like other human beings in different circumstances, in praying like a god--however the gods pray--in one crisis but praying like a human being in another. He is simply--if simply is the appropriate word--depicted as one whole person.

b. The humanity of Jesus

Let us move on, then, to the humanity of Jesus.

Truly God, truly man. The second issue that has occupied the church's attention has been the full humanity of Jesus. John in the Gospel defines his humanity in terms of his dependence, especially his dependence on God. You and I are dependent upon the created order, on others, and on God, because we need what the other supplies: the conditions for living, knowledge and skills beyond our own, greater wisdom than is ours, deeper insight, friendship, richer compassion, and so on. God and the other meet needs that we cannot meet out of our own resources. Dependence upon others is one of the marks of our humanity. At point after point John depicts Jesus as reaching out to God, dependent upon God, his Father. John also shows Jesus as reaching out to his disciples, looking for their appreciative response and sympathetic support.

On the other hand, John defines the divinity of Jesus in terms of his self-giving love. If God is love--if that is the central truth about God--then what is central about God must be central about Jesus too, if we are to regard Jesus as divine. We cannot have two kinds of divinity.

Truly man in his dependence; truly God in his loving.

That leads me to say a word about Jesus as a religious man. We have real difficulty if we understand that he was commending a trust in

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God, a confidence in God, a faith in God, a commitment to God which he did not first of all have and make himself. Jesus can only with integrity encourage us to cast all our cares on God in confidence that God is for us--God has our best interests in mind, and God is trustworthy--if that is how he himself found God to be.

Luke and Matthew are the Evangelists who have the stories of the infancy of Jesus. They each employ a different cycle of stories. Luke seems to be at pains to emphasize that Jesus was brought up in a devout, upright family. He learned as we all learn. He learned to smile because loving parents smiled at him. He learned to talk because parents talked to him, with some feel for words, their beauty and their power. He learned as we all do by observation and by drawing conclusions from observation and experience--his parables are plenteous with illustrations of this fact. He learned to pray because his parents prayed. He took pleasure in synagogue and Temple because Joseph and Mary did. To underline that, it has been

suggested, is at least one of the purposes Luke had in mind in his stories of the childhood of Jesus, the conclusion of which reads: "Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man" (2:52).

Christians sometimes talk about Jesus Christ as though he had walked down the stairway from heaven a ready-made man, with a complete outfit of true ideas and most worthy values in his head; as though he only pretended to be a baby in a cradle. Luke's stories, however, imply that without Mary and Joseph, Jesus would not have been anyone on earth. As Austin Farrer put it in one of his Oxford sermons:

The divine life came to earth in Jesus, he was the heart and centre of it: but the divine life could not live or act in Jesus alone.

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The divine life had to use his parents, his kindred and his friends, to., make Jesus a man; and had to use his disciples and associates to keep him, being a man; for we cannot go on being human, any more than we get to be human, without other people . . . Jesus could only be Jesus, by having Peter, James and John to be himself with; . . . Jesus became the saviour of his friends, by attaching them to himself; but the attachment was mutual. When it came to his hour of trial, he did not want to be alone; he took them with him when he prayed in Gethsemane, he begged them to keep awake and see him. through his agony of spirit.⁴

2. Jesus, Man of Prayer, in Luke

In the second place, then, let us take up what Luke has to say about Jesus as a man of prayer.

1) 1:10: (proseuchomai)

Zechariah was a priest in the Temple in Jerusalem. His turn came to burn incense in the Temple. An Angel of the Lord appeared to announce that his wife Elizabeth would bear a son, named John. This took place when "a whole multitude of people were praying outside at the hour of incense." The coming of Jesus, for whom John was the forerunner, is thus set within Judaism's devotion to the Lord.

2) 1.13: (deesis)

That Zechariah's wife would bear a son is said to have been in answer to his prayer: "Don't be afraid, Zechariah! God has heard your prayer" (TEV).

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3) 2:37: (deesis)

When Jesus was eight days old, his parents had him circumcised. There was a prophetess at the Temple, named Anna. She was up in years: she was either 84 years old or she had been widowed for that length of time.⁵ "She never left the temple, but worshipped day and night, fasting and praying" (NEB). And this presentation of Jesus to the Lord she saw as an act of great significance for Jerusalem, for all who were looking for the holy city's redemption.

4) 3:21-22: (v.21, proseuchomai)

(No. 6: Mark 1:9-11; Matt. 3:13-17)

We do not know why Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist. John's baptism was for the remission of sins. Had Jesus committed sins that he needed to repent of? Was he a "born again Christian"?! . . . Or was it that he reckoned that John's movement represented the best chance for Israel at that time and, by being baptized, did he want to show whose side he was on and where his sympathies lay? . . . Or, rather, did baptism for Jesus signify his decision to enter upon a public ministry, the nature of which eventually led him to his death?

Whatever his baptism signified for Jesus, it did mark his "going public." It was an occasion, moreover, that is reported to have had God's commendation: "Thou art my Son, my Beloved; on thee my favor rests" (NEB).

Only Luke among the Synoptists has it that this approval was given by God while Jesus "was praying."

5) 5:12-16: (v.16, proseuchomai)

(No. 45: Mark 1:40-45; Matt. 8:1-4)

The first three Evangelists each tell of a man who was covered with leprosy--an outcast from society, to touch whom rendered one ritually

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unclean--who came up to Jesus, "threw himself down and begged him, if you want to, you can make me clean!" Jesus reached out and touched him. 'I do want to,' he answered. 'Be clean!'" (TEV). And straightway the leprosy left him.

Jesus commanded the man to go to the priest and make an offering for his cleansing so that he might get certification that he was rid of his leprous condition, but not to noise abroad what had happened. But naturally enough, the man with skin now healed and clean could not contain his joy, and talked freely about the Healer.

This mighty work was followed by others so that crowds came to hear him and to be healed; but there was something about a ministry of working miracles--or something about people's understanding of that ministry and their response to it--that troubled Jesus, and so "he would . . . go off to some place where he could be alone and pray" (JB).

Jesus did not come just to be a miracle worker and he was not at ease with a response that was merely wonder and astonishment, without the reorientation and commitment of the life.

6) 6:12-16: (v.12, preuchomai, proseuche)

(No. 72: Mark 3:13-19; Matt. 10:1-4)

The choosing of that inner circle of Twelve to whom Jesus most fully gave himself was not something that he did light-heartedly. Matthew says simply and succinctly that Jesus made the choice. Mark writes that he went up into the hills to make his decision. But Luke says, "He went out one day into the hills to pray, and spent the night in prayer to God. When day broke he called his disciples to him, and from among them he chose twelve" (NEB).

No doubt the prayer had to do with the character of his own vocation, the nature of his own mission, and what it was that should be looked for in those who would be invited or challenged to join him in that mission.

7) 6:28: (proseuchomai)

(No. 75: Matt. 5:44)

There is a saying attributed to Jesus in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount which runs like this: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." It is found in strengthened form. in Luke: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you."

It is an injunction which Jesus binds to his own heart--but only the Jesus of Luke--in the word from the cross: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (23:34).

The narrow way that Jesus enjoins he walks also himself. The cross he calls upon others to carry he too carries.

8) 9:18-22: (v. 18, proseuchomai)

(No. 122: Mark 8:27-33; Matt. 16:13-23)

By all accounts, the confession of Peter at Caesarea Philippi, "You are God's Messiah" (TEV, NEB), was a turning point in the ministry of Jesus. Luke has it that shortly after this, Jesus "made up his mind and set out on his way to Jerusalem" (v. 51, TEV). The King James Version's phrasing of this, "he steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem," has held the attention of the church for generations.

Although Peter's confession--if that is the best word to describe it--is recounted by all three of the first Evangelists, it is only Luke who says that the question "Who do the people say I am?" (NEB) arose

"one day when Jesus was praying alone in the presence of the disciples" (NEB).

9) 9:28-36: (v. 28: proseuchomai)

(No. 124: Mark 9:2-9; Matt. 17:1-8)

Following on the heels of the Caesarea Philippi confession, Jesus took Peter, James, and John up a "high mountain." (Mount Tabor, visible from many parts of Israel, is the traditional scene, but Mount Hermon, 9, 100 feet high, would be nearer Caesarea Philippi.) It became the mountain of Jesus' transfiguration when, as Luke puts it, "the appearance of his countenance was altered, and his raiment became dazzling white," and out of the heavens there came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him."

The transfiguration is pictured by each of our first three Evangelists, but it is only Luke who tells us that the reason why Jesus was on the mountain, in company with Peter, John, and James, was that he took them up there with him to pray.

10) 10:1-16: (v.2, deomai)

(No. 139: Matt. 9:37-38)

Both Luke and Matthew tell of a mission on which Jesus sent his disciples--not simply the Twelve, but a wider group of some 70 persons. They were to proclaim the gospel, and at the same time they were encouraged to beseech God--God who is "the lord of the harvest"--that he would send even additional laborers into the field.

11) 11:1-4: (vv.1-2, proseuchomai)

(No. 146: Matt. 6:9-13)

The Lord's Prayer is found in two places in the Gospels: in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew and in a different setting in Luke. Only

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in Luke is it said that the disciples came to him asking him to teach them how to pray because he himself was praying. His life was transcendent, victorious over circumstances, because he tapped depths deeper than himself, he aspired to heights that rose in majesty above him. Prayer meant so much to Jesus that what he had they wanted too; what it did to him they wanted done to them also.

These are the features of the response that Jesus made to the disciples' request:

The focus of all prayer is first of all on God. The first question in the Shorter Catechism of the Westminster Confession of the 17th century is, "What is the chief end of man?" And the looked-for answer is, "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever."⁶ That gathers up Jesus' first teaching about prayer. It is God's rule of love, justice, mercy, and truth that comes first, in women and men. To give ourselves to the achievement of that: that is how God's name is hallowed. That is how we show respect for God and how we express filial obedience to God.

Second, the need for daily bread to sustain and nurture our life is a legitimate need. It is right and proper to pray for the meeting of that need.

Third, we people do wrong, and what is wrong needs to be set right. And so the prayer moves on to a petition for forgiveness of sins. But the nature of the process of forgiveness is such that we are not able to receive what God has to give and is willing to give, unless we are willing to grant to others what we ask of God.

Finally we are taught to pray not to enter into temptation--or not be brought to "the test" (NEB, JB) or to "hard testing" (TEV)--which

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probably means: "Cause us not to succumb to inward temptations and seductions and the kind of outward tribulations and trials which can overthrow faith."

12) 19:45-48: (v.46, proseuche)

(No. 200: Mark 11:15-19; Matt. 21:12-13)

The cleansing of the Temple by Jesus is a story told by Luke, Mark, and Matthew. There are some differences among the three accounts, but in all three what distressed Jesus was that worship had been perverted. Its primary purpose had been to glorify God--it was to have been "a house of prayer," say all three; to join people together in an ecumenical fellowship--"a house of prayer for all the nations," as Mark put it;⁷ and to achieve and sustain justice in people's dealings with other people; but it had been turned into a place for raising and making money.

13) 22:31-34: (v.32, deomai)

(Nos. 237c, 238: Luke 22:39; Mark 14:26-31; Matt. 26:30-35)

The accounts of the last days of Jesus reveal that the disciples were tense, apprehensive, anxious. One disciple who the Master felt would be especially tested by the events at hand was Simon Peter. Of him Jesus said: "Satan demand[s] to have you, that he might sift you, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren."

That Jesus had this special concern for Peter and took this extra thought for him is something that is said only by Luke.

14) 22:40-46: (vv.40, 41, 43, 44, 45, proseuchomai, proseuche)

(No. 239: Mark 14:32-42; Matt. 26:36-46)

If in the Gospel of Luke we are looking at Jesus as a man of prayer, the most moving incident of all is the one which, by every

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token, was the experience that was of greatest importance to Jesus, namely, the prayer in Gethsemane's garden.

It is a prayer uttered under threat of death. The circumstances were such that Jesus sought the company of those closest to him to sustain him. It was a prayer for knowledge of God's will--often, in the particular, not easy to come by--and for strength to do that will. It was a costly prayer--costly in its praying, costly in its outcome.

The heart of the matter is expressed variously by each of the Evangelists:

Plen ouch hos ego thelo all' hos su--is what Matthew has;

all' ou ti ego thelo all' ti su--is how Mark has it;

plen me to thelema mou alla to son ginestho--is what Luke writes.

But the meaning is as Luke has it, "Not my will, but thine, be done."

What made Jesus God's Son and earned him God's commendation was his willingness to seek out and do the will of God. What makes us sons and daughters of the Most High is that same search, dedication, and commitment.

Conclusion

Now let us put down some things by way of conclusion.

a. Luke and Mark and Matthew

The first three references to prayer and praying in Luke have to do with the quality of the environment into which he was born. They are found only in Luke. Of the remaining 12, including "Father, forgive them" prayed as Jesus hung from the cross, two are found in Matthew as well as Luke (Nos. 7 and 10) and two occur in all three Synoptic Gospels (Nos. 12 and 14). The other eight are peculiar to Luke.

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New Testament scholars sometimes think in terms of various strands in the Jesus tradition: what is there in Mark and has been made use of by Matthew and Luke; what is found in the "Q" (Quelle) source that is common to Matthew and Luke though not found in Mark (although that cannot establish the boundaries of "Q"); what is peculiar to Matthew ("M"); and that which occurs only in Luke ("L"). The portrayal of Jesus as a man of prayer owes something to Mark and "Q" but most of all to "L". How much Mark had available to him but for one reason or another did not use, but which was known to Luke and used by him, we do not know. How much derives from Luke's special source(s) we cannot say. How much is Luke's invention--finding it necessary to account for Jesus in terms of some ultimate Source beyond himself--we cannot be sure of. What we can say with confidence is that Luke at least found it impossible to tell the Good News about Jesus without underlining the fact that he was a man of prayer.

b. Prayer

1) After the temptation in the wilderness, graphically depicted in both Luke and Matthew but referred to only in a single verse in Mark,⁸ Jesus began a ministry of teaching in his "home town" (TEV/NIV/NEB) of Nazareth. They all three say the teaching regularly was given in synagogue. But Luke's is a fuller, richer statement: "And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up; and he went to the synagogue, as his custom was, on the sabbath day."⁹

Jesus was an active participant in the life of the synagogue and the Temple. The first of these is evidenced in the invitation extended to him that day in Nazareth to expound the prophet Isaiah. He was a critical loyalist. He set out to reform and build up what they stood for at their best, not reject and tear down.

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Regular, public worship--or regular, private prayer, for that matter--will not guarantee that on every occasion we shall have a deeply moving, significant, uplifting, life-clarifying experience of God. But the chances are that it will make such experiences more likely. On the 26th of February, 1943, I bought my first book of prayers: *The Temple*, by W. E. Orchard.¹⁰ After forty years and many books since, I still cherish it as one of the greatest. In the Introduction, Dr. Orchard said:

The setting apart of regular times of prayer, however short, is most desirable, and the value of them is not to be judged by the fact that these will rarely be the times of greatest devotion or when the heights of communion are attained; but they may be preparations for the great times. In the writer's very limited experience of these higher reaches of the life of prayer he has always found that any great visitation of God, which has surprised the soul when it was not consciously seeking, has nevertheless nearly always followed some more assiduously disciplined season of prayer.¹¹

Baron Von Huelgel, the Roman Catholic theologian and philosopher (1852/1925), engagingly linked together the relationship between form and life, life and form, in this word: "I kiss my child not only because I love it; I kiss it also in order to love it."¹² There is profound wisdom in the habit of life that is pictured by Luke of Jesus in this statement: "he went to the synagogue, as his custom was, on the sabbath day."

2) What follows is some indication of the range of Jesus' interests and concerns in prayer.

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We have already taken account of the fourfold movement in the Lord's Prayer on putting God first; on our need for bread day by day; on forgiveness; on asking not to be put in situations where the forces against us are so great that faith is likely to be put to rout. I would argue that what the Jesus of Luke taught he first of all practiced.

On putting God first: That is there in the character of synagogue worship and teaching and Jesus' giving himself to both; and it is there also in the "Not my will, but thine, be done."

What William Temple said about worship includes what needs to be said about prayer, for prayer is at the heart of worship:

It is the opening of the heart to receive the love of God; it is the subjection of conscience to be directed by Him; it is the declaration of need to be fulfilled by Him; it is the subjection of desire to be controlled by Him; and, as a result of all these together, it is the surrender of will to be used by Him. It is the total giving of self.¹³

On Jesus' need for daily sustenance: That is seen in the praying that centers on: the meaning of life, the choice of vocation, and the spirit in which that vocation is to be lived out--these decisive issues especially (Nos. 4, 5, 8, 9, 10, 14); the choice of friends (No. 6); the well-being of those friends (No. 13); and the quality and the character of the people's religion, especially that it should have God in mind first, that it should be ecumenical in outreach, and that it should aim at the achievement of justice in people's dealings with people (No. 13).

On forgiveness: That is found in Jesus' extending forgiveness to those who without just cause were making that young life ebb away on a cross: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." It was

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the living out in his own circumstances of that saying that occurs only in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount: "So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift."¹⁴

On asking not to be taken unawares by some overpowering temptation or some overmastering trial: There is no indication in Luke or the others that the strong Son of God prayed such a prayer or needed to, although the saying from the cross that is found in Mark and Matthew, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani" ("My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?")¹⁵ may suggest that such a prayer would not have been inappropriate in the heart and on the lips of Jesus.

c. Christology

Finally, we may draw a conclusion that has to do with Christology, our doctrine of Christ.

In their definition of Jesus, the writers of the New Testament move between the poles of his union with God and his being distinct from God. Three comments may be made about this polarity, the last of which especially has to do with our study tonight.

First, much, of course depends on the character of Jesus' union with God.

Second, taken one by one and overall the authors of the New Testament do not stake out the claim that Jesus of Nazareth exhausts the being of God: that there is no more to God than what we have seen and experienced in Jesus Christ.

Third, if Jesus is totally identified with God, it is difficult to make sense of Luke's depicting Jesus as a man of prayer. He would be

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but a god who prayed to himself, self-centered, if not narcissistic in his concentration on himself. How do we account for: "[when Jesus ceased praying], one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray'"; "Father, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come"; "Simon, Simon, I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail"; "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do"; "not my will, but thine, be done"¹⁶ if Jesus is in the fullest and most literal sense God?

Better to look upon Jesus as the human face of God--dependent upon God for daily bread and for guidance and strength in all the great crises of life, devoting himself to the will of God, at one with God in loving obedience--with God taking pleasure in a person of Jesus' character and disposition, and affirming, "You are my Son, whom I love" 3:22, NIV).

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