

Prayer in Luke-Acts:

Luke presents prayer as being essentially important in the Christian's life – it is mentioned over 30 times in the Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles (both written by Luke).

a) **Many of the prominent people in Luke's Gospel are 'people of prayer:'**

Zechariah (Lk 1:5, 13, 25 and 1:67f.): Zechariah was at prayer (Lk 1:10) when an angel of the Lord appeared to him with the news of John the Baptist's miraculous birth ("he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's womb" (Lk 1:15). Later, Zechariah, "filled with the Holy Spirit," also bursts into a **prayer of praise**, (called the Benedictus, Lk 1:68-79, "Blessed by the Lord, the God of Israel, for he has visited and brought redemption to his people....").

Mary (Lk 1:26, 1:38f., and 1:46f.): In Lk 1:26f., "the angel Gabriel is sent from God" to Mary to invite her to be the Mother of Jesus. She is told that her son, Jesus, "will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary is "troubled" by the announcement and "ponders"/considers the news. The angel explains that "The Holy Spirit will overshadow you..." Mary's considered reply is – "May it be done to me according to your word/will" (Lk 1:38). Later, **Mary prays** "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my saviour..... The Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name..." (Lk 1:46-56).

Elizabeth's response to Mary is **to burst into a prayer of joy** ("Most blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled." Lk 1:42-45).

The Angels (Lk 2:14f.): Having told the shepherds the news of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, the angels break into a **prayer of Glory or Praise** (Lk 2:14, "Glory to God in the highest.....").

The Shepherds (Lk 2:15f.): In Lk 2:20, "the shepherds returned [to their fields], **glorifying and praising God** for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told to them."

Simeon (Lk 2:29): Luke says that "the Holy Spirit was upon" Simeon (Lk 2:25f) and had told him that "he would not see death before he had seen the Messiah of the Lord." "Prompted by the Spirit" he comes into the temple and, having seen the Messiah/Jesus, Simeon **prays his canticle** (Lk 2:29-32, "Now, Master, you may let your servant go in peace, according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation.....").

Anna (Lk 2:36-38), a prophetess, who "worshiped night and day with fasting and prayer" also came into the temple. And **she gave thanks to God** and spoke about the child to all who were awaiting the redemption of Jerusalem".

The Disciples "**were all united as they continued in prayer** with the women and Mary" (Acts 1:14).

Notice that all the above-mentioned prayers were focused on Praising God and Thanking God for His Plan of Salvation – and note also the presence of the Holy Spirit inspiring those prayers. Is Praise and Thanks our focus?

b) Jesus was a Man of Prayer:

That **Jesus was a man of prayer** is mentioned over a dozen times in the Gospel of Luke. For example: Lk 3:21-22, 5:15-16, 6:12, 9: 29, 9:18-21,10:21, 11:5-8, 18:1-8, 18: 9f., 22:32, 23:31, 23:44-46 (12++).

Lk 3:21-22 states that Jesus, who had been baptised by John the Baptist, was **praying** when “the Holy Spirit descended on him.”

After intense periods of preaching, healing, and exorcising, Jesus would often retreat to deserted places to **pray** (Lk 5:15-16).

Before selecting the Twelve apostles Jesus “**departed to the mountain to pray, and he spent the night in prayer**” (Lk 6:12).

Before the first prediction of his passion, Jesus “**was praying** in solitude, and the disciples were with him” (Lk 9:18).

On the occasion of the Transfiguration, Jesus went “**up the mountain to pray**” (Lk 9:28-36).

When the 72 disciples returned after their first missionary journey (Lk 10:1-16), Jesus “rejoiced in the Holy Spirit” and “**praised**” the Father in prayer (Lk 10:21 - “I give you praise, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for although you have hidden these things from the wise and the learned you have revealed them to the childlike”), that is, to those who trust the Father.

On another occasion, one of Jesus’ disciples asked him to “teach us to pray” (Lk 11:1-4) and, in answer, Jesus taught them the ‘**Our Father.**’ It’s worth noting that **the prayer begins with the Praise of the Father and the hope that “your kingdom come.”** In other words, the ‘Our Father’ prayer highlights the Father’s Plan/Will; It 1) praises God for His Will/Plan, 2) prays that his Will would ‘come,’ that is, be realised; 3) it recognises that we are included in God’s Will, and all of the petitions in the prayer are focused on the achievement – through us/others - of that Plan/Will.

In Lk 11:5-13 we find Jesus, **continuing to speak about prayer**, saying “ask and you will receive, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you.”

The Parable of the Unjust Judge and the Persistent Widow (Lk 18:1-8) tells us of “the necessity and efficacy of **constant prayer**” (Patella, *Gospel according to Luke*, p. 117).

The parable of the Pharisee and the Tax-collector at prayer (Lk 18:9-14) shows us **the appropriate attitude to God in prayer**. The purpose of this parable, only found in Luke’s Gospel, is not to downgrade religious practices (e.g. fasting, tithing), but to stress that one’s attitude in prayer should not be one of justifying oneself in the eyes of God and/or others. **The tax collector stresses his need of God and asks for forgiveness for his failings.**

In Lk 22:32 **Jesus prays for Peter** “I have prayed that your own faith may not fail; and once you have turned back, you must strengthen your brothers and sisters.”

Jesus’ final prayer is recalled in Lk 23:46 (“Father, into your hands I commend my spirit”).

[Discussion on the Prayer of Jesus in the Garden: Lk 22:39-46]

Jesus’ prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane is another example of a conversation, initially a pained, passionate appeal to his Father to ‘let this chalice pass,’ which later becomes an active acceptance of the Plan/Will of his Father-God, Who has ‘the bigger picture,’ and whom he trusts with his life, literally.

Conclusion:

Prayer, in Luke’s Gospel and Acts is first and foremost an affirmation of the existence of a God who wants a personal, living and loving relationship with each and every individual person he has created and sustains.

This loving God wants all people to know, understand, accept and appreciate His Plan for their eternal happiness (Lk 3:6) – this is His gift to each person and it comes ‘free, gratis and for nothing!’

In Luke’s view, then, our response should lead to prayers of **Praise, Wonder, Amazement, Awe, and Thanksgiving** - as it did for Mary, Elizabeth, Zechariah, Simeon, Anna, and of course Jesus himself: as in the hymn ‘How Great Thou Art.’

Fr Pat Collins has said: **If ‘thanks’ was the only word we ever spoke, it would be enough.**

For all the people in Luke’s Gospel and/or Acts, prayer is a spoken and/or unspoken Conversation with our present/living God (Father/Son/Spirit) - a natural, spontaneous conversation – as, for example, in Mary’s case (Lk 1:46-56 - “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my saviour..... The Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name...;” see also Lk 10:21 (“I give you praise, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for although you have hidden these things from the wise and the learned you have revealed them to the [trusting] childlike”); but it is also deliberate, planned - as in Jesus’ case (Lk 6:12 - when he “departed to the mountain to pray, and he spent the night in prayer”).

In Luke’s view prayer is a fostering of that personal and loving relationship – through **seeking a better understanding of God and of God’s Plan for Creation. Then, created to be a co-worker/partner, one is committed to progressing that Plan (by transforming oneself and one’s own world).**

The abilities and skills needed to understand and progress God’s Plan are **freely available** to us through the Holy Spirit, our travelling Companion-Mentor-Helper (as Christ was the travelling Companion-Mentor-Helper to the disciples at Emmaus) - as in Lk 24:49 “But I am sending the promise of my Father [namely, the Holy Spirit] upon you,” see also Lk 24:13-35, Jn 14:26.

Some of the very old Manuscripts/Copies of Luke's Gospel, in recording the **'Our Father'** have an interesting variation. Instead of **'Thy Kingdom come'** they have **'May the Holy Spirit come upon you'** (G. H. Lampe, *Peake's Commentary on the Bible, 1962-1992, p. 833*). **That shows the close link in Luke's mind of the Spirit as the completer/achiever of the Kingdom.**

As recognised in the **'Our Father' and in the account of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane**, there is also a place for **Petitioning Prayer** – praying for the Spirit-given empowerment/power to play our part (and that others might play their parts) more fully in progressing, achieving God's Plan. This presumes continuous prayer for knowledge, understanding, courage, etc. – **in fact, for all the gifts of the Spirit** – as the progression or achievement of the Plan/Will is in the empowerment of the Spirit and in our empowerment.

In a word, for Luke, **prayer is 'our-faith-in-action,'** a process of transformation, the 'push' to be a better person/Christian and the 'push' to make the world a better/Christian world.

Gerhard Lohfink says that "It would be dangerous to pray, or to talk about the right way to pray, without recalling again and again the words of Jesus that are so hard that they cut every Christian to the quick: **'Why do you call me 'Lord,' 'Lord!' and do not do what I ask of you?'**" (Lk 6:46).

Prayers for the realisation of the kingdom of God must be accompanied by action!

In fact, for Luke, prayer was the concentration and the consecration of one's entire life on fulfilling God's Will/Plan as one's only concern, because that was why we were created: and that is how we become our 'best selves,' that is how we bring God's kingdom on earth. That's our challenge!

[Leonard Cohen's song ('If it be Your will')]