

# Jesus' Private Prayer Life

Galilean Ministry Part 6  
Mark 1:35-39 11/11/2017

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Summary: The fact that we are told of the circumstances of Jesus' prayer but not the content shows that it's recorded as an example for us to follow. This kind of prayer is occasional (for times of special need), intentional, uninterrupted (fewer distractions), relational, and profitable (worth the considerable cost, resulting in clarity, ordered priorities, strength against temptation, and effectiveness, which exposes how strong your desires really are).

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**Mark 1:35** Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. **36** Simon and his companions went to look for him, **37** and when they found him, they exclaimed: "Everyone is looking for you!" **38** Jesus replied, "Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come." **39** So he traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons.

## Should We Imitate Jesus' Prayer Life?

### Review

We left off last time at Peter's house in Capernaum in the middle of the night. Earlier that day Jesus had preached in the synagogue and then cast out a demon right there in the synagogue. Then he went to Peter's house and healed Peter's mother-in-law, and then after it got dark out, the whole city of Capernaum showed up at Peter's house with all their sick and demonized. And Jesus healed every one of them – but not all at once. Each one, individually, he touched them and healed them and then moved on to the next one. He started after dark, and he kept going until he had healed them all and cast out every demon. And after everyone was gone, he finally went to sleep. But he didn't sleep long.

**35** Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.

## Description

So let's imagine that scene. Everyone in the house is fast asleep, including Jesus. But then Jesus wakes, and he's got something on his mind – something important. Something that requires more than just thinking it through. It's something he needs to work through with the Father. This is something that requires intensive prayer.

So Jesus quietly slips out of bed, puts on some clothes, and steps outside. In the days before electric lights, the city is completely dark and quiet. He makes his way through the deserted, pitch-black streets of Capernaum and keeps walking until he comes out into the open fields outside of town. The demons who had been so painfully banished from Capernaum the night before shudder as they see their worst nightmare now coming out where they are. But he's not coming after them this time.

Beyond the fields are some hills. And as Jesus gets up into the hills, there's a hollow in the hillside up ahead that's hidden from view. He sees that and thinks, *That's where I can meet with the Father without anyone interrupting.*

Why didn't Jesus just pray on the walk out there? I'm sure he did, but he needed more time than that. This was an extended time of prayer – the kind you can't do just lying in bed for 10 minutes, or even going for a long walk.

## Meeting God in the Desert

It says he went to a **solitary place**. That's the word for desert or wilderness, which is a little strange, because there is no desert in that area. It was lush, green, cultivated land. But Mark uses this word to describe a secluded place because he wants us to connect the dots in our minds between this and the last time Mark used this word which was back in verses 12-13 to describe the place where Jesus was tested by Satan.<sup>1</sup>

The place where God's presence is most available and the place where Satan attack's us the most is very often the same place. Israel had a long history with the desert, both as a place of testing, and also a place of meeting with God. It's where they were tested for 40 years, but it was also the place where they got the 10 Commandments. It was the place where God led them with a pillar of fire and smoke. It's where Elijah met with God when he was running for his life.

So Jesus is running on very little sleep, but he gets up way before dawn and takes this long walk to a secluded place to pray, because he's got something really big on his heart that he needs to work through with the Father. What was it? Was on his mind? What did he pray about? Mark doesn't tell us. Mark doesn't tell us what Jesus prayed. What Mark wants us to know is *that* Jesus prayed, and what time it was and where Jesus went to do it. The Holy Spirit didn't distract us with the content of Jesus' prayer, because he wanted us to focus on the fact that Jesus prayed, and the circumstances.

## The Various Kinds of Prayer

So let's do that. Let's see what we can learn about this particular kind of prayer. It's important to realize that there are different kinds of prayer for different purposes. 1 Thessalonians 5:17 teaches us to **pray without ceasing**. All through the day your conscious of God and you offer those quick little 10 or 20-second prayers about whatever's going on - an ongoing conversation. That's one kind of prayer.

Another kind is *corporate* prayer – praying with other believers in the church. In the book of Acts we see the incredible importance of that kind of prayer.

And then there is your daily routine of prayer – daily devotions. In Daniel's case, he got on his knees and prayed every morning, again at midday, and again in the evening.

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<sup>1</sup> This is the 5<sup>th</sup> time Mark has used that word in chapter 1. He used it in vv.3,4,12, and 13. Here Mark adds the word **place**. It's a wilderness-type place in the sense that, just like a desert, there are no people there.

**Matthew 6:6 when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen.**

So there is moment-by-moment prayer, daily prayer, and corporate prayer – each one of those has a purpose, and each is important. But there's another kind of prayer that's also important, and we learn that from Jesus' example here.

Someone might ask Jesus, "Why go all the way out of town and miss out on sleep and ministry opportunities in Capernaum? You just need to learn to pray without ceasing." Jesus knew how to pray without ceasing. And I think it's safe to assume his daily prayer routine was unparalleled, but this is different. It's not something Jesus did every day. He knew about corporate prayer, but this prayer had to be in private. So in addition to praying without ceasing, daily devotional prayer, and corporate prayer, Jesus' example teaches us the importance of a 4th kind of prayer – extended, intensive, private prayer. Getting away to a secluded place and spending a long segment of uninterrupted time with the Lord in focused communion with God.

That's something that Jesus not only did here, but it was something he did often.

**Luke 5:16 But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.**

It wasn't every day, but it was **often**.<sup>2</sup> If you were around Jesus much, you would just get used to this. Frequently he would just disappear, and no one could find him because he found a place to pray where he wouldn't be interrupted.

In chapter 6, after feeding the 5000, he has all the disciples pile in a boat to head back over to Israel, he shoves the boat out into the water, but he doesn't hop in. He sends them across, but he stays.

**Mark 6:45 Immediately Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. 46 After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray.**

One way to be alone is to get up early and steal out of town; another way is to put all your friends in a boat and give it a shove.

**Luke 6:12 One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God.**

So we see this repeatedly in Jesus life, and when the writer of Hebrews summarized Jesus life he mentioned these intensive prayer times.

**Hebrews 5:7 During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.**

## **Example for Us**

The fact that Jesus did it this often, and the fact that the Holy Spirit made sure it was recorded in Scripture numerous times – never telling us what Jesus prayed, but just highlighting the fact that Jesus got alone in secluded places for extended times of prayer – it's clear that this is a pattern the Lord laid down for us so we could follow in his steps. This is something that we are to imitate.

Jesus had access to omniscient knowledge and omnipotent power. So why would he go to the Father for guidance or strength? It's because he became like us in every way except for our sinfulness. Yes, he had access to omniscience and omnipotence, but he did not utilize that in ways that would give him an advantage in living the life that he calls us to live. He imposed upon himself the same limitations and weaknesses that we have to deal with, so he could lay down an example for us. And so when he needed

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<sup>2</sup> Literally "Jesus was withdrawing to lonely places and praying." The word "was" is imperfect, and the terms "withdrawing and praying" are present participles. The translations take them as iterative presents, meaning it was repeated action.

guidance, he didn't cheat and use his divine knowledge. He made it so the only way he could know what to do next, and where to go next, was the same as for us – he had to seek God earnestly in prayer. And he made it so when he needed more spiritual strength, the only way he could get it was the same way we have to get it. When he was distant from the Father, he didn't just revert to his eternal trinitarian oneness with the Father – he had to wake up early and go somewhere and seek hard after God, just like we do.

All that to say this is for our example, so I don't want to skip over this verse too quickly. Prayer is an area where I so desperately want to grow in my spiritual life. I want to learn everything I possibly can from Jesus' example. And so I spent some time this week looking very carefully at this verse to learn everything I could from Jesus' example.

So what does God want us to learn about this kind of prayer from the way it is described in this verse? There are 5 things that stand out to me. First, it was *occasional*.

## Occasional

It happened often, but it wasn't part of his everyday routine. When the disciples wake up and Jesus isn't there, the disciples don't say, "Oh, he's out having his prayer time. We better not bother him." This wasn't part of Jesus' daily routine. It was occasional – not in the sense of being rare, but in the sense of being connected to some particular occasion.

After the feeding of the 5000, the people were pressuring Jesus to become their king. And in response to that, he withdrew to the mountain for secluded prayer. The night before he died, he went into the garden to pray. And he wanted his disciple to pray with him. But he went out a little further, away from them, so he could pray alone, but still know that they were praying with him nearby. Another occasion was the night before he selected the 12 Apostles. That was the time he prayed all night. So it seems that this kind of prayer was occasioned by significant crisis points in Jesus' life.

Every once in a while something happens in your life that is especially important –

- a really crucial decision,
- a time of great suffering or loss,
- a threat to your marriage or one of your kids,
- a crisis in the church,
- some major temptation or failure,
- feeling distant from God.

You always need prayer, but there are occasions in your life when you really need it. And that's what this kind of prayer is for. It's not common, everyday prayer; it's special prayer, for key occasions when special grace is needed.

And in Jesus' case, there were a lot of those occasions. It wasn't once in a blue moon. Luke says it was **often**. What was Jesus' problem? Was he just a really weak man? Yes.

**Hebrews 5:2 He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness.**

Jesus became weak, in order to deal gently with us in our weakness. He was weak, and he needed a lot of grace from God just to get by – just like me. So the first thing we learn is that for Jesus, this kind of prayer was occasional, but frequent enough that it described his life.

## Intentional

Second principle: it's not only occasional, but also *intentional*. It's not the kind of thing you do on a whim. It's usually not a spur of the moment decision to do this kind of prayer. It seems like the strongest point Mark is making in the way he describes this is that Jesus went out of his way. Mark makes a point that it was **very early in the morning, while it was still dark**. Literally, **at night, a long time before sunrise**. He's getting up at 3 or 4 in the morning, and he's still out there praying when his disciples finally track him down later in the day. Most of us don't just have multiple hours of free time when we

can just disappear like this without some planning. This kind of prayer happens when you spend a long time thinking through your situation and realizing that you have a special need that calls for special, unusual seeking after God, and you make some plans to make it happen.

If you're waiting until this just sort of happens spontaneously – like, you're thinking one of these times, in a sudden fit of spirituality you're going to grab your Bible and head up into the mountains for an afternoon of seeking after God, just ask yourself – how many times has that happened in the last year? Or decade? Or lifetime? This kind of prayer doesn't happen spontaneously; it's intentional.

## **Uninterruptible**

Third, it's not only occasional and intentional, it's also uninterruptible. That's the point of the secluded place. That's why Jesus didn't just wake up and go out on the back porch. He went way out of his way to make sure he would not be interrupted. Even though people had important reasons for interrupting him, still, he removed himself from that.

This is hard for us in our culture, because we are addicted to interruptions. You go 10 minutes without getting a text or email or Facebook like, or some kind of alert, and you're checking to see if your phone is broken. For some people, being alone for any extended time at all is hard. Just like for others of us, being with people for an extended time is hard. But both are crucially important. The most important place to go meet with God is the gathering of the church – no question about that. The church is the dwelling place of God, so we do that every week.

## **Focus**

But Jesus showed us that secluded, private prayer is also important, because the greatest enemy to prayer is distraction. And nothing is more distracting than human beings. People are interesting. If a person is nearby, you look at him. If he talks, or texts you, or communicates in some way, that gets your attention. If he moves, you notice.

So when you have something that requires intensive, focused prayer, you've got to get away from people. Does that mean you won't be distracted? No, all it takes for me to get distracted is my own brain and a terminal case of ADD. I'll get up in the mountains and be enthralled with the presence of God and the magnificence of his creation – until a mosquito comes along, and then that's all she wrote. You can never eliminate distraction, but you sure can reduce distraction.

And sometimes it helps just to trade the everyday distractions for some new, different distractions, because it puts you in a different frame of mind, which is what you want for times of special prayer. Why am I getting bit by this mosquito? Oh yeah – because I drove all the way up here into the mountains to seek hard after God.

## **Relational**

This kind of prayer is occasional, intentional, uninterruptible, and #4, relational. It's time alone with God. Intimacy. Relationships become intimate in seclusion. That's why a guy doesn't usually say to his girlfriend, "Hey, why don't we just hang out with your parents and your little brother tonight? I'd love to just sit and field questions from your dad about what I'm planning on doing for a career." That's usually not how it goes. Usually it's more like, "Hey, do you want to get out of here?"

And if the father has any sense he'll say, "Sure, where are we going?" Why? Because both the boyfriend and the father know that intimacy grows in privacy.

And that's true with God too. There are things that need to happen in your relationship with God that can only happen in times of secluded communion with God.

It may be that you need an extended time of contemplating all the various blessings God has given you and responding in gratitude – not just for five minutes, but for a couple hours. Maybe you've fallen into self-pity, and five minutes of gratitude just isn't doing the job. It's not readjusting your attitudes or emotions. It's not giving you joy and warming your heart in feelings of love toward God. And so you

need to take some time and just bask in the light of God's goodness for an extended time like someone sitting in the sun trying to get a tan. It just doesn't happen in five minutes.

Maybe there's a sin in your life, and you've tried to repent of it, but you just have a hard time really taking it seriously. The Bible says it's a big deal, but for whatever reason it just doesn't feel like that big deal for you, and so your repentance is kind of hollow. There's no real brokenness before God. And you need an extended time of talking to God about that and listening to him and his Word to readjust your heart and bring true brokenness.

Maybe there's some good thing that you really want, and you're crying out to God to give it to you. And God wants to give it to you. But he wants to give it to you after a long period of really banging on the door like the persistent widow. He knows that this gift will only be a good gift in your life if you get it through really intensive prayer. If it comes too easy, then it'll do you more harm than good. So God is eager to give it to you, but it can't happen until you get alone with God for one of these extended prayer times.

Maybe there's a particular attribute of God that just isn't penetrating your heart and it's causing problems in your spiritual life because your understanding of that aspect of God is so weak. And so you need a long time alone with just you and God and the book of Psalms.

I could go on and on. It's like any other relationship. If you're married, sometimes a peck on the cheek is just fine. But other times you need to go out to a nice dinner or even get away for a week alone somewhere.

It's so easy to forget the relational aspect of prayer. I've had times when I've spent an hour saying things in prayer to God and I got to the end of the hour and realized I never paid attention to God that whole time. I was thinking about my requests, but I wasn't thinking about God. I didn't put any effort into considering his special presence with me in that time. I was saying prayers, but I wasn't really praying – I wasn't communing with God. Kind of like when a wife says to her husband, "You're here, but you're not really present." What does she mean by that? She means your body is there, but your mind is on other things. You're not paying attention to her.

We do that with God too. There are times when I'm supposedly praying, that if Jesus were physically present, and I was having a conversation like that with him, and half way through he said, "Hello – I'm right here," it would startle me, because I wasn't even thinking about him.

When you're seeking the presence of God, realize – he's seeking your presence too. Rule #1 for experiencing the presence of God is this: be present. If you want him to be present with you, you be present with him. Stop obsessing about everything else and just turn your attention to him. Take a moment to enjoy the incomprehensible fact that you are, in that moment, *alone with God!* Let the rest of the world fade away, and realize, "It's just you and me right now God." Be astonished at the fact that you're there, looking up to God, and he's there, looking down upon you. You're attending to him and he's attending to you. You have his full attention, and he has your attention. And you are interacting with your Creator in a way that no one else in the world will ever know – it's just between you and God.

## Privacy

Enjoy the intimacy. It's interesting to me that we have all these examples of Jesus' times of secluded prayer without any indication at all of what he said. It's private.

Sometimes you need to speak out loud to God. Very rarely do I ever do that, but in the moments when I need to, it's powerful. Hearing my own voice say certain things to God has an impact on my own heart. But I don't do that in the grocery store, because I don't want to end up on the evening news. Sometimes you need to sing some hymns or praise songs. Sometimes you're wrestling through something and you've got so much emotion boiling inside you, if you are honest with God about what you're saying, it's going to come out as a shout. Hebrews 5:7 During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death. Jesus was known for not caring about what people thought of him, but even for Jesus, it would be a little weird to be in the middle of a crowded mall to start shouting and crying to God about something. He did that in private.

And when I talk about shouting – I’m not talking about shouting in anger at God. Jesus never did that, nor should we. Jesus shouted, but he was never irreverent. If he had been irreverent, God would not have listened to him.

**Hebrews 5:7 ...he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death and he was heard because of his reverent submission.**

So he shouted reverently. That might be hard if you think reverence just means sitting quiet in church and being somber and still. Reverence is not the same as rigor mortis. Reverence is honoring God above all, and treating him as God. And one thing that especially honors God is running to him in times of gut-wrenching emotion, and crying out to him as our only hope. There’s nothing reverent about passionless prayer – that’s irreverent.

## Profitable

So private, secluded prayer is occasional, intentional, uninterrupted, relational, and one more: profitable. All the descriptions Mark gives us are descriptions of what this cost Jesus. It cost him time, effort, sleep, and ministry opportunity. And yet it was still worth it to him.

Your life is busy, right? You’ve got a lot of important things you really need to get done. You’ve got responsibilities, projects, tasks – time is at a premium. Let me ask you this – do you think you’re more pressed for time than Jesus was? Do you think the things Jesus had on his schedule to do were less important or more important than the stuff on your schedule? Or do you picture him as some wandering monk who had nothing but free time on his hands? It wouldn’t surprise me if the least important thing on Jesus’ to do list was more important than the most important thing on my to do list. Jesus had eternally important tasks that were waiting on him. He had thousands of people who desperately needed him. And he didn’t have another 30 or 40 years to live – he only had a couple years left. He got up early, stayed up late, cancelled days off, worked hard – he did not have any time to spare. So for him to take a whole morning to get alone for prayer like this, and to do that often – that cost him. It meant there were projects he just wouldn’t be able to do. It meant there were people who desperately needed him, people he knew he could help in wonderful ways, who just had to go without help.

And it cost him sleep. We all know what it’s like to go without sleep. You can’t function, everything is difficult – it’s miserable. You get too sleep deprived and you’ll have serious health problems.

Why was Jesus willing to pay that high a price? He was showing us that extended, private, secluded prayer is profitable. It’s worth more than what it costs you.

And this is an important point, because some of you are sitting there hearing all this and you’re resisting it. The last thing you need in your life right now is a new, big, time-consuming thing. And so you’re trying to find ways to say, “That was good for Jesus, but I don’t know if it’s something I need to do. I don’t need to do that because...” You’re fetching to find a way out of this. Why? Because it just doesn’t seem worth it to you. It doesn’t seem rewarding enough to motivate you to make whatever changes you need to make to do this. If some rich person offered to pay you \$10,000 to go spend a half a day alone somewhere, you’d do it in a heartbeat, because the reward is high enough. You won’t do this until your soul is convinced that the reward is worth it.

And what I’m telling you is that Jesus’ example shows us, without question, that in those times when this kind of prayer is needed – not every day, but on those special occasions in life that call for intensive prayer, the rewards of doing this are more than worth it. It won’t cost you as much as it cost Jesus, because his time was worth more than our time, and yet it was worth it to him because of what he got out of it.

## Clarity of Direction

So what did he get out of it? What specifically came out of this particular prayer time? Three things stand out to me. I'll just mention them quickly, and we'll develop them more as we move through the book.

First, absolute clarity of direction. Jesus has a decision to make. What should he do next? Stay here in Capernaum for a while, or move on?

**37 and when they found him, they exclaimed: “Everyone is looking for you!”**

How perfect is that? The people are enthusiastic, they are seeking him out – what an amazing ministry opportunity. But then again, there are a lot of other towns that need to hear the gospel as well. What should Jesus do? Sometimes it's good to stay put – like when Paul spent 3 years in Ephesus, or like when he told Timothy to stay there in Ephesus. Other times the thing to do is pack up and leave so you can reach others. How do you know when it's time to stay and when it's time to go? Look how Jesus responds:

**38 Jesus replied, “Let us go somewhere else – to the nearby villages so I can preach there also.**

There's no hesitation, no equivocation, no collaboration with the disciples – Jesus knows exactly what to do. It's time to leave that place and go to another place – absolute clarity of direction.

## Divinely Ordered Priorities

Another related outcome has to do his priorities.

**38 Jesus replied, “Let us go somewhere else – to the nearby villages so I can preach there also. That is why I have come.”**

The people were pressuring him to do something different from his purpose for being in the world. Why were the crowds in Capernaum clamoring for Jesus? Same reason the crowds always clamored for Jesus – it wasn't because they were seeking salvation or for forgiveness of sins. They didn't crowd around him shouting, “Show us the way to God.” No, they always come clamoring for the same thing – miracles, and especially physical healing.

And many people in ministry today have that same mentality. They say, “You have to meet people's physical needs first, before you can give them the gospel.” And so they spend all kinds of resources on soup kitchens and food pantries and all kinds of humanitarian efforts to meet physical needs. But one thing you see in Jesus ministry is when people came to him for healing or other miracles, but they were receptive to his teaching, he did not give them what they were asking for. He moved on to preach somewhere else, because his priority was the spiritual, not the physical.

The people were trying to get Jesus to stay. And when people want you, especially if they are really needy and you have the ability to help them, it's very easy to get pulled away from your calling. When people are all excited, it's so easy to get caught up in the moment, and lose sight of your individual calling. And you can spread yourself too thin.

When Jesus got away from the people, away from the disciples, alone in seclusion and spent some extended, quality time alone with God, he was able to focus on exactly why he was there and what he was supposed to be doing, and he was able to maintain right priorities. He didn't come to heal or take care of temporary physical needs; he came to bring the gospel.

## Strength Against Temptation

A third thing that came out of this prayer time – unassailable strength against temptation. When Jesus went into the wilderness the first time, Satan tried to tempt him to bypass suffering. “If you're the Son of God, don't be out here starving to death – make some bread. Don't suffer and die on the cross –



gain your kingdom in an easier way.” Then Satan left him for a more opportune time, and this was one of those times. He went there to meet with God, but as usual, temptation found him out there too. Satan wants Jesus to drift from his real purpose, and bask in the fame and adulation of the people. He tried to tempt Jesus to get caught up in crowd size. That’s the temptation every preacher faces, because we want full nets, and we have a hard time seeing the difference between full buildings and full nets. But after intensive prayer, Jesus came out with a clear vision of that difference, and he didn’t fall for this temptation. This kind of prayer will give you strength against temptation.

## **Effectiveness**

One more benefit of this kind of praying: it’s effective. When you pray this way about something, there is a much greater chance that God will say yes to the prayer.

**James 5:16 ...The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. 17 Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years.**

The reason God answered Elijah’s prayer wasn’t because he was Elijah. It was because he prayed really, really hard.

## **How Strong Are Your Desires?**

And that’s helpful, because it shows us how strong our desires really are. When you want something, do you want it enough to do this? What do you want most in life? You can’t pray this hard for everything – there isn’t enough time in the day. So which things do you want badly enough to pray like this for them?

I’ve counseled with people who were stuck in some besetting sin, and they have tears streaming down their face, and they say, “I’m so sick of being entrapped by this sin! I’m so sick of constantly falling and falling and falling. I’ve tried everything, I never make any progress – I’m desperate!” And I lay out a plan for them that involves this kind of intensive prayer, and when I talk to them the next week, “Did you get out for extended, secluded prayer?” “Oh, no – I guess I didn’t get to that. I did all the other stuff you suggested, but I didn’t do that.” “Are you going to do it this week?” “Well, I don’t know, I’ve got a lot going this week...” How much do you really want victory?

What are the deepest desires of your heart? You’re praying for a loved one to be saved? You’re in a spiritual desert and you want to experience the presence of God again? You want a better marriage? Or a marriage period? Some ministry desire? What is it that you really want? Whatever it is, do you want it bad enough to pray like this for it? Do you want it enough to fast – go without some meals, and to sacrifice a day, and put forth the energy it would take to pray like Jesus? The fact that God responds in special ways to this kind of prayer lets us get a glimpse into how strong our desires really are.