



The Jesus Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.

The prayer “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me,” is an ancient Christian prayer with roots in the Old and New Testaments. In a few short phrases, it expresses the essence of Christian doctrine with its call to Jesus Christ, divine and human, who, when we ask for mercy, grants us peace. In keeping with the great commandment that we love God with all our heart and mind and soul and strength, it is practiced to unify intellect and emotion, body and spirit. It focuses our attention on God and opens our whole being to receive through Christ the gift of God’s merciful loving-kindness.

Calls upon God for mercy are frequent in the Old Testament, where God’s mercy is identified with God’s steadfast love. Psalm 51 is a good example. Christ himself prayed words from the Psalms, notably on the cross. In the New Testament, passages most often associated with the Jesus Prayer are Luke 18:38, in which the blind man outside of Jericho calls out, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”, the prayer of the publican in Luke 18:13, “God be merciful to me, a sinner,” and the cry of the Canaanite woman, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David” (Matthew 15:22).

The Jesus Prayer evolved over centuries of Christian history with a variety of forms and uses. The desert fathers and mothers of Egypt in the fourth century felt a deep need for penitence and used the prayer of the publican to keep the remembrance of God continually before them. The standard form of the Jesus prayer printed above, often with words “a sinner” added, emerged sometime between the sixth and eighth centuries. The Jesus Prayer was used primarily in Eastern Orthodox Christianity, although the idea of prayer using passages using the name of Jesus was promoted in the West. Noting the many scriptural passages concerning the name of Jesus, we invoke Christ’s name in the Jesus Prayer not in any magical sense, but in the biblical sense of a name in Semitic culture representing the presence and power of the one named. As we pray this prayer, we invoke all that Christ represents.

The Jesus Prayer is being rediscovered now in the Western church. The silent repetition of these simple words can be a way to center ourselves for contemplative prayer, to ask God to heal whatever needs healing in our lives, or to call on God’s help and turn our attention to ask God as we go about our daily tasks. It can become a way of “praying without ceasing,” as we are advised to do in 1 Thessalonians 5:17.

Some Christians today find it helpful to repeat this prayer to relax for sleep or before a difficult task. It may be used to focus the attention when trying to concentrate on something. In the place where the traditional prayer says “a sinner,” some Christians substitute words that tell God their



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particular condition at the time; for example, “I am afraid” or “I am angry” or “I am joyful.” Many people find it reassuring to learn that the silent or verbal repetition of a prayer is a long-established Christian practice, not an unorthodox idea of our own time. Those who have used this prayer report that it becomes more valuable to them over time.

It seems appropriate for Moravians to use this prayer because of its Christ-centeredness, its emphasis on penitence and healing, its recognition as a “prayer of the heart,” and its link with the Eastern church which first brought the Gospel to the lands of the Ancient Unity.

It is also meaningful to note its use by John Hus, whose last words while being burned at the stake included the words of the Jesus Prayer in the singing of a Latin hymn.

An eyewitness account follows:

“The Word of Peter of Meadonovice, who so carefully recorded the last moments of his beloved master:

When the executioners at once lit the fire, the Master immediately began to sing in a loud voice, at first “Christ, Thou son of the living God, have mercy upon us,” and secondly “Christ, Thou son of the living God, have mercy upon me,” and in the third place, “Thou who art born of Mary, the Virgin.” And when he began to sing the third time, the wind blew the flames into his face. And thus praying within himself and moving his lips and the head, he expired in the Lord. When he was silent, he seemed to move before he actually died for about the time one can quickly recite “Our Father” two or at the most three times.”

Spinka, Matthew. John Hus at the Council of Constance. New York: Columbia University Press, 1965.



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