

THE LORD'S PRAYER—GOING DEEPER

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“Our Father in heaven . . .”

The Lord's Prayer has been called “the gospel in a nutshell.” In it we discover the grace, the depth, and the joy of our relationship with God.

OUR

At the very beginning of the prayer, and all the way through, Jesus teaches us to use the pronoun *our*. In this way Jesus tells us that we are not praying this prayer in isolation. Whenever we pray this prayer, we are part of a community. While I pray alone in my room, I am joined by multimillionaires as well as farm laborers throughout the world. I pray with and for my dearest friends and my bitterest enemies. I am reminded to care for those who are discarded by society. When we call God our Father, we include all God's beloved creatures in our embrace.

FATHER

Jesus does not invite us to pray to a generic, faceless God. He invites us to pray to “our Father.” In some places the Greek text even retains the Aramaic word Jesus actually used when talking about or to his Father. It's the word one might use in a family setting, where we would use not the more distant word *Father* but the more intimate *Dad*. By doing this, Jesus invites us into the eternal, loving relationship that exists between the Father and the Son. Jesus' invitation to call God our *Abba* is our entrée into the trinitarian community of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That's Paul's point in Galatians 4:6: that God has sent “the Spirit of his Son into our hearts,” whereby we cry “*Abba*, Father.” Jesus is saying, “My *Abba* is your *Abba*, my Dad is your Dad.” Praying to our *Abba*, we affirm our adoption into the loving trinitarian family at the heart of the universe, the Father and the Son, through the Holy Spirit.

IN HEAVEN

When we address our Father *in heaven*, it is not as though we are trying to reach an absent God in some far-off place. Heaven may, in fact, be much closer than we think. Heaven is the control tower of the universe, the “oval office” of the cosmos. To pray to our *Abba* in heaven is to realize that no matter how bad, how tragic, how impossible, how difficult things look here in this world, our *Abba* knows the end from the beginning, he has history in his almighty hands, and he is going to finally bring all things together in Jesus Christ. Life is not just one thing after another. Life is lived under the providential care of an active, loving, deeply involved Father in heaven.

When we pray to our *Abba* in heaven, we can leave all our concerns, our worries, our fears in his loving arms. For beyond earth, in that heavenly dimension of reality, even the hairs of your head are numbered. The contradictions that tear our hearts apart, the tears that fill our eyes, the inexplicable tragedies that plunge us into despair—all can be laid in the hands of our heavenly *Abba*.

“Hallowed be your name . . .”

Our first impulse is to think that this prayer has to do with us. Somehow *we* have to hallow God's name. We ought to worship and live in such a way that God's name is hallowed. The Heidelberg Catechism acknowledges that, but it's decidedly secondary. First of all, “Hallowed be your name” means “Help us to truly know you, to honor, glorify, and praise you. . . .” (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 122).

When we pray “Hallowed be your name,” we are not asking anything of ourselves; we are asking something of God. We are asking, in effect, “God, be God, here and everywhere. Let your blazing glory shine in the world. Let your awesome power and love be felt and experienced by everyone. Let everything in the universe vibrate with the beauty of your holiness. O Abba, God, let the whole world know who you really are.”

One of the great lessons of the Lord’s Prayer is that true prayer is God-centered. We implore God that our lives might revolve around him like the planets around the sun. We pray that we might fulfill the very purpose for which we were created. We beg for God’s name to be hallowed because when God’s name is hallowed, the whole universe is perfectly balanced and wonderfully whole. We are praying for God to lift us up out of our petty preoccupations, our self-centered pursuits, our sitcom mentality. We are imploring God to melt with the blazing beauty of his holiness the banal fog in which we pass our days.

But there’s even more to it than that. This is an eschatological prayer, as so much of the Lord’s Prayer is—oriented to the future. It prays for God’s final victory. “Hallowed be your name” looks forward to a day when the whole universe will be luminous with the holiness of God, when God’s love will be wholeheartedly returned and God will be worshiped and adored by all creatures. When, as Psalm 96 says, all the nations “worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness,” all the earth trembles before him; the sea roars, the fields exult, and “all the trees of the forest sing for joy”—then shall our prayer be answered. “Hallowed be your name!”

“Hallowed be your name” means that we look for the day when ordinary life will be transfigured with holiness, when the commonest human activities will glow with glory, when everyone and everything will be “holy to the Lord” (Zech. 14:20)!

“Your kingdom come . . .”

When Jesus began his earthly ministry, he declared, “The time has come. . . . The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:15). Jesus is the Messiah, the son of David, and as the angel promised to Mary, “The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David . . . his kingdom will never end” (Luke 1:32-33). The King has arrived, and the kingdom is near.

But what exactly does Jesus mean by the kingdom of God? It’s not a territory in the world, or a nation like others. Perhaps the best way to describe it is as God’s reign. The kingdom of God is when and where God’s gracious rule is established. It’s when and where God is known, worshiped, and obeyed; and it’s when and where peace reigns among people and nations.

Jesus further refines this vision of God’s coming eternal kingdom in his teaching. In his parables about the kingdom, Jesus teaches that the kingdom does not come with marching armies or bombastic noise. It comes quietly, in small, unseen ways, like a seed growing secretly. But the most jarring aspect of God’s kingdom is the treatment of the King. He was tried and tortured, mocked and ridiculed, and finally enthroned on a cross with a sardonic sign over his head, “The King of the Jews.” The King entered his reign not through a festival coronation, but through death on a cross.

That was necessary in God’s plan to redeem from sin and death all who would be the kingdom’s subjects. The King arose in triumph and victory, and he ascended to the throne in heaven. In his heavenly reign he is acknowledged by all his subjects as “King of kings and Lord of lords.” And one day he will return to establish God’s kingdom in a new earth, where death is banished and human life will flourish under the reign of God.

So what does it mean when we pray, “Your kingdom come”? First, it means that we willingly consider ourselves as subjects of the King, placing our lives and resources at the King’s disposal. While we may owe allegiance to earthly rulers, kingdoms, and nations, our ultimate allegiance is to God’s kingdom. We live by its laws, conduct our lives by its principles, and bring the good news of the King’s grace to the people around us.

Second, we pray for God’s kingdom to advance in the world today. We ask that in every area of life, from business to government, from the arts to the military, from entertainment to education, in churches and in other institutions of society, God’s kingdom will grow like a seed buried in the ground. By the Spirit’s power, individuals and groups, living under God’s gentle reign, turn the world toward love and peace.

Finally, we pray for the return of the King—for only then will God’s kingdom be fully established; and war, death, and pain shall be no more; and every tear will be wiped away.

“Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven . . .”

When we pray for God’s will to be done, or God’s purpose to be fulfilled, we are signaling that God’s will and purpose are precisely our own hope and desire. We want God’s will to reign over all creation. We want God’s loving and fulfilling purpose to be accomplished.

Jesus teaches us to pray that God’s will be done “on earth as it is in heaven.” First, we are not talking about heaven as some remote place far away, but as that “spiritual” dimension of reality that may be closer than we think. Heaven is the “control tower” of the universe, the place or dimension where God reigns and his purposes shine.

We specifically ask that God’s will or purpose be done on earth as well. This assumes, of course, that earth is in rebellion against heaven, resisting God’s kingdom rule. Given that fallen reality, we pray that God will reclaim this world under his kingdom rule. We ask that God’s rule be more and more evident in our world.

But when we dig deep down, we realize we are asking that we ourselves be more and more transformed so that our lives reflect God’s purpose and our decisions reflect God’s will. That involves an ongoing struggle for us, though, for we still live under the shadow of the fall. Sometimes our will is at odds with God’s will, and our purpose in life does not reflect God’s purposes for humanity. So we are not just asking that we recognize and glorify God’s will and purposes, but that the Holy Spirit will bend our will toward God’s will. The Heidelberg Catechism puts it bluntly: “to obey your will without any back talk” (Q&A 124).

Jesus, our brother, also prayed this prayer and struggled with its implications. In a night of fear and dread, he faced the reality of the cross, and his will did not align with the will of the Father. “Take this cup from me,” he prayed; “yet not my will, but yours be done” (Luke 22:42).

“Give us today our daily bread . . .”

We are now entering the second part of the Lord’s Prayer. The first two petitions (or three—depending on how you count them) have to do with God. Prayer is, first of all, God-centered. Once we have centered our lives in God, we are ready to pray for our own needs.

We are creatures with stomachs. Jesus teaches this prayer not to angels but to human beings, and it encompasses the experiences and the very real needs we face. Just as the first few petitions reshape our vision of God, the next petitions of the Lord’s Prayer reshape our understanding of our lives in this world. To grasp this reshaping—this converting power of the Lord’s Prayer—all we have to do is stop and think about the words: Give . . . us . . . daily bread.

GIVE

We are dependent. We have our hands out. In Psalm 145:15-16 the psalmist prays, “The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food at the proper time. You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing.” We live daily out of God’s hand.

Of course, it often doesn’t feel that way. We work, go to the store, and buy our bread. It seems like it comes from us. And that’s why we need to learn to pray the Lord’s Prayer. Things are not as they

seem here. In fact, we live our daily lives out of God’s gracious hand. We are deeply dependent creatures, every one of us. If the earth cools just a few degrees, the whole structure collapses, and famine comes. It’s sun and oxygen, it’s rain and crops, that sustain our lives.

In this prayer, “bread” not only means bread, or even food, but literally everything that human life requires. Bread, water, shelter, clothes—you name it. God does not want us to grab unthinkingly but to receive with gratitude. Life is given, not grabbed. It is received from God, not wrenched from the earth.

US

What an important little word. We remarked about it already in the opening of the prayer, “Our Father.” Here it is again. Give us . . . Give me . . . How different they sound.

The plural “us” here invites us to reflect on a powerful truth. Whenever we pray the Lord’s Prayer meaningfully, we ask God to meet not only our own needs but also the needs of everyone else in the world. This prayer makes me feel the hunger pangs of the child in Botswana, the nausea of the woman who drank filthy water in Haiti, the misery of the homeless person downtown. This prayer weaves us together in a single human fabric. The bread we receive is also bread we share.

DAILY

The word *epiousios*, translated as “daily” in our text, is a unique word in the Greek, but a recently discovered papyrus from fifth-century Egypt helps us understand what it means. The papyrus contains a list for daily rations for slaves, and it uses *epiousios* to mean “ration.” So we could translate the petition this way: “Give us today our ration of bread.”

Like Elijah waiting at the Kerith Ravine for ravens to bring his daily food (1 Kings 17:2-6), we live day to day in dependence on the one who gives us our daily bread. Jesus teaches this spirit of dependence when he says, “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink. . . .” (Matt. 6: 25). The Father, who cares for the ravens, will also give us what we need.

Now, this doesn’t mean we eliminate planning, or resource allocation. But it does mean that we live one day at a time. We don’t run around thinking that our planning will supply our needs. Instead we have a deep understanding that we live each day with hands outstretched to our heavenly Father.

“Forgive us our sins as we forgive . . .”

What is forgiveness all about? We sometimes assume that forgiveness is about getting off the hook, or about God looking the other way. But it’s actually about reconciliation. God forgives so that he can have a relationship with us. And the only way God can have a relationship with sinful humanity is to forgive us, to absorb our guilt in his own self, which is exactly what he did in Jesus Christ. God’s forgiveness is not some cheap perfume to cover the stink of sin; it is very costly. God doesn’t want to be God without us, and forgiveness, costly forgiveness, is the only way.

We ask for forgiveness not in the hope that maybe we might get it, but because it is there. In Psalm 130, the psalmist prays, “If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered” (Ps. 130:3-4). We dare to pray, “Forgive us our sins (debts),” because God has already declared them forgiven in Jesus Christ. The ultimate price is paid. The absolution is complete.

The more we pray each petition of the Lord’s Prayer sincerely and truthfully, the more it’s likely to stick in our throat. And there are bound to be a lot of sticky throats on this one. All the petitions of this prayer call us to action. But here, unlike any other petition, the Lord spells out our obligation in the prayer itself. To ask for forgiveness means we are also willing to forgive.

“As we also have forgiven our debtors.” What does that really mean? Is it some sort of condition? Does it mean that if we do not forgive people’s sins, then we aren’t forgiven either? People have balked at the idea that God’s forgiveness is conditional on ours. Maybe it’s best to say that our forgiveness of others is not so much a condition of God’s forgiveness as a consequence of it.

Jesus told a parable about a servant who was forgiven a huge debt and who then went on to shake down a fellow servant for a piddling amount (Matt. 18:23-34). The master who had forgiven the huge debt was terribly angry and threw the first servant into jail until he should pay back the whole debt, every penny. We are talking not about conditions but consequences. When we fail to forgive others, that simply shows that we do not understand or really accept the gravity and grace of our own forgiveness. Praying the Lord's Prayer reminds us that forgiveness is not only freely given to us; we are called to let it flow through us. We become part of the gravitational field of grace, transforming the enmity of this world into community.

Of course it's one thing to say you forgive; it's another thing to do it. Don't expect forgiveness to happen overnight; it often takes time. Feelings of bitterness and resentment may sweep over us unexpectedly. But, trusting in God's grace, we can forgive.

Reconciliation. That's the goal of it all—a reconciled creation, where sins are forgiven, hurts healed, and wrongs righted. And we cannot be reconciled to God as long as we are not willing to reconcile with our brothers and sisters who have wronged us. Bitterness and hatred toward our neighbor cannot coexist in our heart with love for God, who is ready to forgive us all in Christ.

“Lead us not into temptation . . .”

When we pray this petition of the Lord's Prayer, we are acknowledging the kind of dangerous world we live in—a world, where, as Peter puts it, the devil goes about “like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Pet. 5:8). We are saying to the Father that the only safety in this world is in his hands, in the powerful deep grace of the cross. We're safe only when we stay close to God.

The way this petition reads can be disturbing. “Lead us not into temptation” seems to imply that sometimes God leads us toward evil. But the word for “temptation” here can also mean “test.” From the devil's point of view temptation is an opportunity for our ruin, our downfall. But from God's point of view, it's a test of faith, an opportunity for growth and learning. Another translation of this petition, perhaps more helpful, is this: “Do not bring us to the time of trial” (NRSV).

As we pray this petition, we remember who taught it to us: Jesus, the incarnate Son of God. Jesus himself was tempted by the devil in the wilderness, and the only weapon he had was the power of God's Word. His answer to the devil, again and again, was “It is written . . .” (Matt. 4:4, 7, 10).

The writer of Hebrews tells us that “the one who was tempted in every way” (Heb. 4:15)—not only in the wilderness, but all through his life—“is able to help those who are being tempted” (2:18). The Son, at the Father's right hand, understands the struggle and is there to give us aid and comfort when we will turn to him.

Just after the last supper, and before Peter's great denial, Jesus said to him, “Satan has asked to sift all of you as wheat. But I have prayed for you . . . that your faith may not fail.” Satan, far from being the greatest power, needs permission to tempt. But then Peter's faith did fail. That too Jesus anticipated: “And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers” (Luke 22:31-32).

“Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” Here we come into the heart of the battle. It's a cry to God that he will help us hold on to faith and never lose it. A friend gets stabbed in a parking lot. A high-school daughter gets pregnant. You lose all your zest for life in a bout of dark depression. Your spouse betrays you. You find out you have cancer. That's the kind of world we live in.

We don't walk around in an invisible protective shield. We are vulnerable. When we pray this prayer for deliverance from evil, we admit that we do not have the resources in ourselves to resist. We battle real, invisible, and overwhelming powers. And in our weakness we can reach out for the only One who can deliver.

The battle still rages, but we know who won the war. He won it on the dark night in the garden when others had failed the test. He won it on that dark afternoon when God the Father seemed to forsake him. Therefore we pray with absolute confidence, “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”