

David Seccombe

THE LORD'S PRAYER

A Sermon

WHERE
THE RUBBER
HITS THE ROAD

Prayer is one place where the rubber hits the Christian road. If you don't pray, you are no Christian. I am sorry to say that, but it's the truth.

The Christian life begins with a prayer: "Lord have mercy on me a sinner." The simplest description in the whole Bible of how a person gets to have eternal life is this: "whoever calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved" (Romans 10:13). Then comes a life of fellowship with God, and that means talking to him.


But I don't know anyone who doesn't find prayer difficult. There was a time when every second church was running a workshop on how to pray, and often it amounted to prayer enthusiasts giving you their special recipe. A lot of people doubt whether it is even sensible to pray, since God knows our needs anyway and has predestined what will happen.

My first observation is just this, that Jesus prayed, and that prayer was fundamental to his relationship with God.

Now Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." (Luke 11:1)

Jesus' disciples saw him praying – often – and they were challenged by it. It should challenge us too. If Jesus prayed – often – shouldn't we? If Jesus were here today, isn't this something we would ask him? "Lord, teach us to pray."

The very significant thing to notice next is that Jesus doesn't teach them a method of prayer. That is what many people are looking for. But most of what Jesus said about prayer was anti-method. "Do not pray as the hypocrites do, who think they will be heard for their many words". "When you pray, go into your room and close the door, and pray to your Father secretly", and so on (Matthew 6:6–8).



No, Jesus didn't answer the disciples' request with a method. He didn't tell them *how* to pray. He told them *what* to pray:

And he said to them, "When you pray, say: "Father, hallowed be your name." (Luke 11:2)

The truth is, when the disciples posed their question this may be what they wanted. John the Baptist taught his disciples to pray - not a method, but probably the prayer that summed up the aspirations of their movement. And now the disciples want to know what their prayer should be. The Lord's Prayer is the prayer of the Jesus Movement, and encapsulates Jesus' mission.

Do we belong to the Jesus Movement? Then this will be our prayer too. It would be good if we did not just recite it, but understood and meant it, and prayed it with real desire.

So what's it all about? I will focus on Luke's shorter version of the prayer.

Father, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

Give us today tomorrow's bread.


And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who sins against us.

And do not lead us into trial.

I want to show you how these things fit together and what an extraordinary prayer it is.

To start with, Jesus invites us to share his relationship with his Father. This is sensational. Jesus knows God as his own Father and he invites us to the discovery that the father we think we have is not our true father. Much as you may love or hate your earthly father or stepfather, he is (or was) a guardian appointed by God to care for you until the time you discover the Father who thought you up, gave you life, brought you safely to this day, and wants to be part of your life, to love you and be loved – forever.

There is a huge area of Christian understanding that could be unpacked under the heading of the fatherhood of God. The question to ask ourselves at the beginning is whether we have begun to experience being a child of the heavenly Father. When each of my children was born my wife and I prayed that they might grow up to know God as their true Father. It has been one of the great joys of our life to see them one by one come to that knowledge.



It is the best thing I could wish for you, that like the runaway son in Luke 15, you might come home and find your true Father waiting.

Now let us turn our attention to the first request.

“Father, hallowed be your name.”

What we are overhearing here is a child’s fervent wish that everyone in the world could see how great his Dad is. I doubt there are many children who haven’t at some point boasted about their Dad.

My Dad worked at the Port Kembla Steel Works – No 1 Blast Furnace. Some men were cleaning a tunnel which was supposed to have been purged with steam. Carbon monoxide was still there and they collapsed. The alarm was raised and men hurried off to find breathing gear. My Dad dropped into the tunnel and ran and dragged out one of the men. He ran back to get the second man and collapsed himself. The men with the breathing gear arrived and pulled him and the other man out. Sadly, that man was dead, but they revived my Dad, and

the first man he rescued also lived. How good it was and still is for me, his son, to think that my Dad did that. It gives me pleasure just to tell the story.


But what if your Dad beat your Mum and slept with other women? How did you feel in the school playground when others were boasting? Or what if your Dad was falsely accused of a crime and publicly shamed – how would you feel?

Jesus has a Father who is misunderstood, suspected and accused of all sorts of evil things. He is avoided and his name is used as a swear word. What does that do to a Son who knows his Father is the most generous, kind, forgiving, loving person in the universe?

It pained him. It burned him up. His deepest desire and his first request – he wants it to be our desire too – is that everyone in the world should know the truth about his Father.

But why, “hallowed be your *Name*”?

Because his Name is the handle God has given us to connect with him. We cannot grab God himself and do to him



what we want. We could once, and we crucified him. But now what we want to do to God we must do to his Name – whether we want to praise or bad-mouth him. If we do it to his Name, we do it to him.

If you want to hurt someone badly, you don't have to shoot them; you just say evil things about their name. If you succeed in destroying a person's name, as people constantly try to do to their political opponents, you destroy them and make it impossible for them to function. How can God rule the world when his name is misused and abused and misrepresented and vilified?

So Jesus' number one concern – and he asks us to share it with him, if we wish to belong to his movement – is the Name of God. If we had the time, it would be good to explore how we can not only pray for that, but work for it too. Perhaps that is something you can think about yourself. For now, I must hurry on to ask whether this prayer that God's name be honoured will ever come true.


When we think of the secularists and the new atheists and the Islamists and the many feuding Christian groups and the clerical child abusers and the huge misinformation and confusion in our world about God, it seems impossible that it

should. But Jesus knew it was possible, and he came into the world to make it happen. The way he will bring about that new world, which will be filled with the true knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea, is by his kingdom. So he invites us to pray:

“Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come.”

The whole of the Lord's Prayer, when we understand it, is a prayer about God's kingdom. Jesus began his ministry announcing its arrival. People wondered where it was. How it would come? The secret was that the King had come and was in their midst. Where he was present the kingdom was present, visible in his many miracles and signs: storms stilled, sick people healed, insane people set free, the hungry fed, the dead brought to life. His preaching, his life, and his willingness to die, were all to establish the kingdom.

His resurrection took it a massive step forward, as did his ascension and pouring out of the Spirit, and the inauguration of the mission to the world. However, it will not be complete until he returns and every knee bows before him, and the government of the world



is the government of God, through his anointed Son, Jesus Christ. It is this kingdom for which he asks us to pray.

Think of that: not America or Russia or China, but the whole world under the government of King Jesus, really and visibly! And God known for who he is and loved by all.

It is a sobering thing to realize that much of what the disciples were praying for when they prayed for the kingdom, God has actually done. Jesus' death dealt with sin, his resurrection blazed the trail to life, and his Holy Spirit released God into the lives of his followers.

His true Church is growing in the world and his servants are spreading the message of his kingdom.

So much has already come true, but we will not see the kingdom in its fullness until the Lord himself appears and all evil and suffering is swept out of God's creation. And for that we continue to pray.

From the mountain top where we see all the kingdoms of the world and their ultimate destiny, we seem to drop to

the incredibly ordinary matter of the food which will be on our table today. It seems far removed from the kingdom of God.

“Give us today our daily bread!”

This seems to be the easiest part of the prayer to understand and appreciate – but actually it is the hardest. For there is a problem with the translation. It contains a word which is unknown to us in Greek writings until the Lord's Prayer, so we have to guess its meaning.


This is not the place for a scholarly discussion, so I will tell you what I think, say a bit more in a footnote,¹ and leave it to you to check out.

“Tomorrow's bread, give us daily.”

This is what I think Jesus said, but what does he mean?

He is telling us to ask God to give us now, before the kingdom arrives in its fullness, some of the good things that

¹ “Tomorrow's (*ton epiouision*) bread give us daily (*to kath'hemeran* – “according to the day”). The Greek word *epiousios* is not known before the time of the Lord's Prayer. However, it is a composite *epi* (upon) *ousios* (present, existing). It probably means “future” or “tomorrow's”. The very similar word *epiousa* means “the next day”.



we will enjoy in the kingdom then. “Tomorrow’s bread” refers to the things that people will enjoy in the coming kingdom. And what are they?

They are things like forgiveness, the Holy Spirit, peace and intimacy with God, and fellowship with other believers. These are things which properly belong to the age of the kingdom of God, but that age has dawned even if it is not here in its fullness, and God gives us foretastes now. They make life in this world bearable, even a joy.

Once we understand that the age in which we live, what the Jews called “the age of unrighteousness”, is under sentence of death and should long ago have been swept away were it not for the mercy of God – then we begin to see that even the food on our table today is a gift from the future. Every good thing we enjoy is a mercy from God that properly belongs to the future age, not to this world of rebellion and wickedness.


So I am not advocating we change the words of such a familiar prayer, but that we make ourselves aware of their meaning, and therefore the meaning of our lives. We live under grace, and the Christian prays daily for more of that grace.

Once we understand that the bread we ask for is the bread of life, we see the point of the next petition.

“Forgive us our sins.”

The disciples stood on the other side of the cross to us. John had cried, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” And Jesus knows he has come to do just that. But it will be a struggle. And as they prayed for forgiveness the disciples were unwittingly praying that Jesus would stay true to his mission – that he would go forward to the cross – because it was by dying that he bore our sins and made forgiveness possible.

For us today, we pray for forgiveness knowing that because of the cross it is available to all who ask. We pray with the certainty of Jesus’ promise, “Whoever comes to me, I will never drive away” (John 6:37). Forgiveness is kingdom bread!



The next sentence is surprising, for it is not a prayer at all, but a disclaimer:

“For we also forgive everyone who is indebted to us.”

Wow! What a statement! Do we? One of my great shames as I look back on my life is the woman I visited a few times in my early years of ministry. She told me she could never be a Christian because there was someone she could never forgive. She then told me the terrible story about the farm that was rightly hers, which someone had cheated away from her. I was so drawn into her story that I guess I felt, if it were me, I would not be able to forgive either. We had several meetings where I tried to persuade her towards the gospel, but we always hit this rock. She was right. If she was ever to come to Christ, she would have to give in on this issue. Jesus says, “If you want to come to me, do this.” It is black and white. If he is the Lord, I must obey him.


But why does he insist on this? Simply because his kingdom is a kingdom of forgiven people. It can't

be, if someone is holding a grudge of unforgiveness against a brother or sister.

When Peter asked Jesus about this he responded with the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant (Matthew 18:21-35). The king cancelled a debt of billions owed by his servant. The servant then went out and took someone to prison who owed him a few thousands. It cannot be. The king reinstated the servant's huge debt. The astronomical size of the debt is a reminder to us of how much we owe God, which we can never repay, which God cancels in order to bring us into his kingdom.

So, forgive us, Lord, for forgiveness is the road to reconciliation with our true Father, and reconciliation brings us into Jesus' kingdom now, so we have eternal life and walk with God from this day forth.

Forgiveness is tomorrow's bread given to us today. And yes, some of us have been hugely sinned against in this world, but coming home to our Father and experiencing his forgiveness will change us and make it possible for us to embrace the impossible, and even forgive that unforgivable person – for Christ's sake. In another parable Jesus



likens that to pulling a mulberry tree up by the roots (Luke 17:3-10).

“And lead us not into temptation.”

I have chosen to think about Luke’s version of the Lord’s Prayer because it is the most basic. Matthew’s has been expanded at a few points. That is not surprising. This was the prayer of the Jesus Movement. They would have used it again and again – when Jesus was with them and when he wasn’t. We don’t have to suppose that Matthew is giving us a version of the prayer that was worked up in the early church’s liturgy, because it probably happened when Jesus was still with them. The wording may not have been exact and set in stone. But certainly Luke gives us the heart of it. And it ends with this last petition, which puzzles so many of us, but should be a warning signal that when we sign up with Jesus we enter the sphere of spiritual warfare.


“Lead us not into *peirasmos*.” The Greek word can mean “temptation” or “testing” or “trial”. Would God tempt someone? James says, “No. God tempts no one, but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and

enticed” (James 1:14). But immediately before this he says, “Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial ...” (James 1:12).

He is talking about two kinds of *peirasmos*, which are different but connected. In his prayer, Jesus is thinking of the kind of trial by ordeal that was experienced by Abraham, Job and many of God’s saints, and would be experienced by Peter and by himself. You set out to follow God and then you are faced with a situation where following is costly.

Suppose you were faced with the trial Jesus foresaw for some of his disciples, where a marriage partner says, “If you continue with this stupid Christian faith of yours, I am leaving you.” That is *peirasmos* (trial, testing, temptation). Many Christians in Muslim lands are facing *peirasmos* at this very moment. “Renounce Christ or leave this community!” Or even, “Renounce Christ or die!”

These temptations do not come from God, but from the Devil through his dupes. However, God may allow them, and we should pray that he will not.



You may come to a situation where to continue to follow Christ you must abandon your house and property and all you own. Pray that if you ever do, you may remain faithful. But Jesus tells us to pray that we not be put to that ordeal.

Of course, it still may happen. Peter was challenged directly whether he was a follower of Jesus, and had he owned up he would have been arrested and probably crucified with Jesus. He backed down. God had allowed him to come into temptation, for his own mysterious purpose.

Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane that the cup might pass from him. God led him into *peirasmos*, but gave him the strength and grace to win through. So we know it can happen to any Christian, but it is wonderful to know that God can keep us from it, and encourages us to pray that he will. God does not enjoy seeing his children suffer.

If he does lead us into such a situation, we should know that it is important for his kingdom, and look to him for the strength to get through. The all-important thing is that we put Jesus and his kingdom first. That is what this prayer is all about. This last petition reminds us that for the present we are in a situation

of spiritual conflict. There is an enemy of humankind who opposes all of Jesus' kingdom building efforts.

So there we have it, the prayer of the Jesus Movement, the prayer of those who know where things are going because, come hell or high water, Jesus is building his kingdom. Neither death nor life, nor angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in God's creation will prevent it from coming. I hope you will want to be part of it. I hope that with understanding, this will become a prayer you really pray, from your heart.

Pray that people will come to know what God is really like. Pray for the coming of the kingdom. Pray for the good things of the kingdom to be given to us now. Pray for the forgiveness of your sins, and check that you have forgiven those who owe you. Pray that God will

keep you clear of situations where following him will bring you great suffering – and pray that should it happen, he will give you strength to do his will.

This is Jesus' prayer, the prayer he wants us to pray, because, as becomes clear in the very next parable of the friend who came at midnight, **this is a prayer God intends to answer.**

David Seccombe

is "Extra-ordinary Professor" of New Testament of North-West University, Potchefstroom South Africa. He was Rector of St Matthew's Anglican Church in Shenton Park (Perth) from 1979–1993 and Principal of George Whitefield College in Cape Town 1993–2012. He continues to work for GWC as Roving Ambassador and Research Fellow. His PhD from Cambridge University (1994) is on Jesus' teaching about the rich and the poor and his current research interest is the Gospel of Luke and Acts. He is married to Lorraine and they live in Perth Western Australia. They have four grown-up children.



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