

Pray then in this way:

A Commentary on the Lord's Prayer

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The Lord's Prayer

Matthew 6:9-13 New Revised Standard Version

‘Pray then in this way:
Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Your will be done,
 on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
 as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And do not bring us to the time of trial,
 but rescue us from the evil one.

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“Our Father in Heaven,”

Jesus surprised and shocked the ‘religious’ with many of his attitudes and teachings. He was a Jewish man, but of Northern Galilean origin – not quite ‘kosher’ from a Judean Priestly and Pharisaic point of view.

To address the Lord of Hosts, whose name *YHWH* was so holy (translated as Yahweh by some and Jehovah as others) it had become a forbidden word as Abba – or Dad was certainly remarkable. Abba, Abi or Ab is still in use; it simply means Father. For instance when I go to my wife’s country (Lebanon) my name is no longer Andrew – it is Abu John (John’s Dad).

To regard the Lord of Hosts, the creator of all things, as Dad, is to recognise him as personally connected to you, a parent who has given you life. To say, ‘Our Father’, is to draw us all into relationship with one another, because we all share one Heavenly Father; he is our ultimate parent and I want to stress the concept of parent and not male gender. Jesus commanded us to love God and to love one another; it rather fits his prayer!

Where is Heaven, for Jesus tells us ‘Our Father’ is there? We believe God is omnipresent, always with us. Heaven is not a place above the skies as the ancients believed; it is a realm where we can be with Him. Heaven is where God is. The answer is in Jesus’ assertion; it is a place beyond our earthly experience, outside temporal limitations. After death we may pass through resurrection into God’s eternal presence, if we are judged worthy – and that is through our relationship with Him, mediated through the Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Thus we worship and serve Him.

“hallowed be your name”

Last time we considered how Jesus used the familial address of ‘Abba’ to call *YHWH* (God) Dad; thus in one sense Jesus is reducing the transcendence of God by his familiarity. But God is not to be reduced to human ordinariness. God is Holy, his name is holy - special, divine, set apart; God is perfect.

The implication of the verse is not, ‘holy is your name’; but your name *is* hallowed. Our prayer is to ask for God’s help for us, to honour him and his name. If we allow ourselves to fall into the trap of disrespecting him, then we separate ourselves from God. For as we have a lower stature for God in mind, so we become more puffed up and self-important. The Mosaic Law teaches us that we shall have no other ‘gods’ and anything else is idolatry.

The third commandment says, “You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name”. “Oh my God”, is now a very trendy and cheaply used statement. It is broadcast into our homes day and night and is in thoroughly common usage; yet it is a form of religious swearing. Jesus said, “Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne...” (Matt 5:34). We need to take this issue seriously and be aware of how ‘the world’ is ‘shaping’ us against God. To associate God’s holy name with the profane is denial of his sovereign Lordship, it is a wholly rebellious act. Let us beware and be aware!

Jesus wants us to regard God as a loving and caring parent – familiar to each of us; but God is not to be mistaken as ordinary, he is the creator of all things, being both beyond human imagination (transcendent), and known in Jesus (immanent).

“Your kingdom come.”

The Kingdom of God, or Kingdom of Heaven as it is politely called in Matthew's Gospel to avoid using the sacred word *YHWH* (standard Jewish practice), is a vital concept that all Christians need to understand clearly. The Kingdom is not so much a place as an openness to, and the indwelling of, the *spiritual reign* of God in the hearts and minds of the faithful. This has implications for the faithful now, as well as in the future. When Christ is accepted as Lord the Christian is open to the Holy Spirit of God, which then 'reigns' – one is part of the Kingdom of God. So we are in his Kingdom *now*, living within his blessing.

Jesus is praying that the prayerful will open themselves to the wonder of this reign and accept the love and salvation that God offers. It is a spiritual relationship with God. It was easy for this to become confused in the minds of the people – many probably longed for release from Roman occupation and the unjust rule of King Herod and his corrupt regime. We too can perceive that the Kingdom of God is something that is to come in the future to redeem and rescue our broken world. But the Kingdom of God is both now, and not yet. Jesus redeemed the world and enabled the reign – the Kingdom of God, to begin in a new way.

The Kingdom was proclaimed by Jesus and then by his Apostles and followers. His parables illustrated the implications of God's reign, as Jesus said, "This then is what the Kingdom of God is like..." We are part of this proclamation of the Kingdom in our own time; our role is to continue to invite others to approach God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit and to allow his reign into their lives. Jesus taught his followers how to pray, but he also showed us how to live – how to appreciate and live by Kingdom values and to 'proclaim' by our personal holiness - the way we behave, live and relate to each other.

“Your will be done,”

The Kingdom, the reign of God, can only finally be established as the believer conforms his or her own will to that of God. The bible tells us how the earliest humans – Adam and Eve – were created in innocence. Our ancestors knew God and yet they chose to rebel and through their God-granted free-will preferred to ignore simple guidance and instead went on their own way – rather than that advised by God. However you read the story, literally or allegorically matters not, for the outcome remains – that man has, and continues to ignore God, to reject him and to put self-interest before others. Prayer helps!

Jesus sought the will of his father in all things. As he proclaimed the Kingdom he clearly linked it's breaking-through with the submission of the human will to that of the Almighty. And perhaps this is the most important part of the Lord's Prayer, that having recognised the sovereignty of God, so the obvious consequence and priority is to seek God's will in all our actions – so that his reign may be recognized.

Jesus' prayer was concerned with conformity to the purposes of God – consequently the Christian must emulate this as a pattern for our lives. We have free will, we are not robots controlled by God – otherwise those many who ask, “If God is love, why does he allow such evil to happen?” have a reasonable point. Evil occurs as a result of our failure to surrender and follow God (= rebellion). ‘God is light; in him there is no darkness at all’ (1 John 1:5). If we seek to conform our lives to God's will, rather than our own often selfish and self-important ways – then we are truly loving God in and above all things, and loving others before ourselves. As we sincerely attempt discernment of God's will in preference to our own, so we join Christ in establishing God's reign.

“on Earth as in Heaven.”

Earth and Heaven are separate places. For Christians the bridge between them is the saving work of Jesus the Christ. For the Kingdom (reign) of God to come on Earth, Jesus indicated that each of us had to seek the will of the Father. Jesus was the perfect example of one who sought the will of, and submitted to his Father in all things. ‘Our Father’ is in heaven; Jesus was born on earth and having completed the work of his Father that demanded his very life, was raised by God and finally ascended to Heaven, where he is at the right hand of the Father. Jesus asked the Father for the Holy Spirit to be with us, to be our guide and comforter. We live in consideration of Jesus’ exemplary ministry, and encouraged by the Holy Spirit are enabled to be part of the Kingdom that is both now and not yet, having one foot on Earth and the other in Heaven.

The bible tells us how the earliest humans – Adam and Eve – were created in innocence. Our ancestors knew God; the Garden they lived in (Eden) was like Heaven on Earth, and yet they chose to rebel and through their God-granted free-will preferred to ignore simple guidance and instead went on their own selfish way – rather than that advised by God. It is our fallen nature to rebel against God. However you read the Eden story, literally or allegorically matters not, for the outcome remains – that man has, and continues to ignore God, to reject him and to put self-interest before others. This diminishes life itself and is sin.

God acted decisively in history through Christ ‘The Son’ who was born of woman and God. This was God’s plan to bring Earth and Heaven back together – to enable us to enjoy life in all its fullness forever.

When Jesus comes again, on the day of the Lord, there will be a time of judgement. Those who have sought God’s will, followed the example of Christ and welcomed the Holy Spirit will live in God’s presence forever.

“Give us this day our daily bread.”

Some of you might read a daily bible reading plan with commentary – one I have used is called ‘Daily Bread’. The bible is the starting point for the meal we share at God’s table and it is good to be hungry for it! Jesus, hungry after fasting in the wilderness, in his encounter with the devil, quoted Deuteronomy 8:3 and said, “It is written: Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord” (Matt 4:4). We need food to physically fuel our bodies, but what meaning is there to life if our spirit remains famished, because we are not hungry for the ‘bread of life’.

Often when I offer communion in church it is with these words: ‘The body of Christ, the bread of heaven’. Herein lies the paschal mystery of bread (an unleavened wafer, representing the manna of the Old Testament Wilderness see Deut 8:1-10) being provided by God as a sign of the spiritual food he offers to those who are hungry and thirsty.

Jesus is the bread of heaven, where heaven means God – just as the Kingdom to come – is the reign of God, which has come as we receive the ‘bread of life’ (Jn 6:48). The words of scripture, our prayers, the worship and service we offer to God is the food and drink that enables us ‘to reject the devil and all rebellion against God’ (a Baptismal vow).

Jesus taught us to pray for the bread that truly nourishes and to depend on God – this (bread) is my body, which is given for you – remember me (Luke 22:19). The daily bread we seek is the remembrance of Jesus’ life, his teaching, his healing, his love and compassion and his total self-sacrifice. We remember that God glorified him and raised him to life beyond human imagination; “I am the bread of life, come down from heaven, that man might eat of this bread and not die (Jn 6:48-51).

A final thought, there is an equivalence in Semitic languages between the words ‘bread’ and ‘life’ – life and bread are the same *in* God.

“And forgive us our debts...”

I recently moved house, from my own home into a house provided by the church. I am now a tenant; apparently with a lower creditworthiness as far as the computerised credit monitoring system that tracks our every move, purchase, and credit/store card is concerned. It's just possible that I might seem much less of an attractive proposition were I ever to wish to borrow money from those great institutions to which many are answerable. Why do so many, so easily, descend into debt?

Of course if I am debt-free I have no worries, no one can touch me – but many of us have mortgages, car loans, credit cards and etc. When you owe somebody else you are beholden – you are not totally free – there are some limitations placed upon you. Get behind on the re-payments and then the pressure grows and soon becomes intolerable!

What about our spiritual lives? What might we owe God? He gave us much and yet we always take more and more, (including many things that God told us are not good for us) and in theory we are 'up to our necks in it!' But we are not! Jesus paid our debts in full and there was, and is no comeback on us...or is there?

Does God hold each of us to account for our debts to him? Actually no; through Jesus he cancelled our debts as an example to us. Please look at the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matt 18:23-35). This is God's currency in the 'Bank of Heaven' and his nature is to forgive debts. See how the Father forgives the repentant 'bankrupt son' in Matt 21:28-32.

Trespasses - sins - misdeeds, wrongdoings - they all cost someone! We do not live in isolation but in community with others. What we do and say, how we act, has consequences, often not for ourselves, but for others. God does expect us to follow his example, that's the bargain!

(April 2006)

“as we also have forgiven our debtors.”

‘To err is human’, so the saying goes – but to forgive, that’s not always so natural. A few weeks ago a vicar who had lost a child in the London terrorist bombings resigned because she no longer felt able to teach God’s love and forgiveness. She could not bring herself to forgive the perpetrators. In essence any justice is denied her because the bomber had deliberately killed himself in the act. How would you react, how would I? My heart goes out to her. What would Jesus have said faced with this situation? Was it unforgivable?

We are asked to forgive, that we may be forgiven. Jesus’ parable of the unforgiving servant is about one who hopes, expects, pleads for forgiveness on a large (unpayable) debt, but will not in turn offer forgiveness to someone who owes him relatively little (Matt 18:23-35). In the end he receives justice and not mercy from his king. There is the matter of the one who is in the wrong recognising their error (sin) and then offering some act of apology (penance) and perhaps offering some form of restitution. Sadly the Vicar from Bristol is denied this and I feel she is in an almost impossible situation. I’m certain more moderate voices will have offered regret and apology on behalf of the bombers, but can these voices be heard? I recall the man who lost his son in the IRA bombings and after some time went to Ireland to meet those who were broadly responsible for the campaign of violence. It was his super-human act of wanting to understand, appreciate (but not to condone) that ultimately led to the foundation of the Good Friday Agreement. It was not a perfect peace, but one man’s act of preparedness to forgive led to peace and the saving of many lives.

And that’s what Jesus offered us through his sacrificial death on the cross. “Father forgive them, they know not what they do.” One man’s agony opened the possibility of transformed life and salvation to all. When Jesus asked us to forgive others, he showed us the way.

(May 2006)

“And do not bring us to the time of trial,”

I once was subpoenaed to appear and give evidence in a civil case at a Magistrates court and a lot was riding on the outcome. The trial had been proceeding for several days when I arrived. One of the clerks asked me to fill in a form – “here just put church of England if you don’t have a particular religion”, he advised me! I was most irritated and said, “I am a Christian, that’s my faith and the denomination in which I worship is The Church of England and has been for many years, I am in fact ordained!” The challenge to testify started before I even entered the courtroom. All too soon I followed a ministry of agriculture man in giving evidence. I was examined by one barrister and then another. I had not been coached in any way, I didn’t know what to expect – all I could do was to answer questions, truthfully. The barrister for the defence asked me a few gentle and general questions and retired to allow the prosecution barrister to have his turn and I was shown some photographs. These showed dust being blown out of a ventilation duct with high pressure spray water during the cleaning cycle, which happened just five times per year for several hours – but the prosecution claimed were clear evidence of the continuous output of clouds of dust causing his client grievous nuisance. I boldly said that they were mistaking fine water particles for dust and had assumed, quite wrongly, that the defendant, my customer, was continuously polluting the atmosphere. The magistrates intervened with their own questions for me and the prosecuting barrister and his team of solicitors looked crestfallen. I was dismissed and the case was then settled rapidly. The truth was out!

Although I was a witness, I certainly felt that I was on trial and although I was under stress being uncertain of the place and procedure, once I was talking on my subject I was fully confident and the truth was heard.

‘Save us from the time of trial’ are the words of modern translations – not ‘Lead us not into temptation’. What has happened to the Lord’s Prayer, who has changed it – are they right? Think about it like this; God doesn’t lead us into temptation (that’s the devil’s role) but throughout our lives we are tested. In the Old Testament book of Job, God certainly allows Satan to put Job to the severest of tests. So Jesus asks us to pray that we not be tested beyond our endurance, that God the Father might save us at the time of trial – both during our lives and at the time of final judgement. Please read 1 Corinthians 10:1-14, to see how Paul helps us with interpretation of temptation and testing.

When we resist temptation our confidence grows, just as in the courtroom when I could plead my subject – the truth was revealed and judgement was swift and just. How much more then will God our Father who is just and merciful hear the prayers of the faithful and restore us when we are tested by the ‘trials’ of life. The Book of Common Prayer Communion service quotes ‘Comfortable Words’ of scripture, ‘If any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the propitiation for our sins.’

So we pray that ‘Our Father’ forgives us our sins, as we forgive others and saves us from being tested beyond our endurance. How aware are we as individuals of how our personal failings contribute to hurt and affect others? The gospel of Christ is one of repentance, reordering and

renewal of our lives as we come near to the Kingdom of God.

Jesus was put on trial for his life and in the midst of various confused and false claims about just who he was, said, 'I came into the world to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.' Pilate perhaps representing the whole human race asks the fundamental question, 'What is truth?' Therein lies the human inability to be just, because we cannot fully recognise the truth.

It was Jesus who came to reveal the truth and the way and the life, and so we pray that God will save us from being put on trial for our lives and protect us from the one who tries to confuse and misdirect us – Satan, the false accuser. What will you write on your court entry form?

“but rescue us from the evil one.”

I wonder what you believe about evil? Is it an abstract force – the opposite, or even absence of good? Do you personify evil in the Hebraic biblical tradition, wherein he is known as Satan the accuser, the slanderer (liar), wicked and evil one. Or perhaps you believe that evil is a potential that is innate within all of God’s creation.

There is scholarly debate as to whether the last line of the text of the Matthean Lord’s prayer refers to the *evil one*, or just plain *evil*. There is quite a difference. Let me attempt to explain. An evil one (Satan) represents an exterior force opposing and constantly in conflict with the good God. Ancient Eastern religions such as Zoroastrianism (originally from modern-day Iran) cast humans living in the midst of the eternal battle between good and evil forces. From my studies I believe there is evidence for this theology influencing that of the Christian era. This ‘eternal battle’ is characterised in many horror movies, including *The Exorcist* and much more light-heartedly in the *Star Wars* and other such science fiction stories (Darth Vader, the dark clad fallen Jedi Knight – who has turned to the dark side of the force, is readily recognisable as a biblical demonic character).

Some would talk of being possessed by evil and losing their freedom to act – I’ve heard testimony from Rwandan men of the Hutu tribe - police, civilians and priests alike, asserting that they *were overcome, possessed by evil*, during the barbaric 1994 genocide, when millions of Tutsi were suddenly systematically and cold-bloodedly hacked to death with machetes. “Yes, we did it but we were powerless to stop ourselves, *the devil possessed us*”...forgive us!

Others feel that good and evil lie within each human heart and it is the ‘moral law’ that civilises us and on the whole prevents us from committing evil. They might say that the personification of evil is a parable in itself, a representation of the conflict that lies deep within. Christians believe that each person is born with an essentially fallen nature and that we have to choose God and goodness and it is through our relationship with God In Jesus Christ that we are saved from evil and the consequences of sin. Jesus casts out sin and unites us with God.

The question of evil is a challenge to theists (people who believe in one God). The normal question goes like this...God created everything – thus God created evil/the devil and with his foreknowledge knew the suffering he would inflict upon his creation – how then is God good? Why does he allow such appalling evil and suffering?

Here is a defence. Yes, God created everything. God created man with freedom, within a universe that is not static. Man must be free to choose good/God (perfection). Thus he must also be free to reject God and choose evil (imperfection). Evil arises from the free will of man to choose. God created the *fact* of freedom, whereas man performs the *acts* of freedom. God made evil possible but it is man who makes evil actual, through the free-will choices he makes.

Back to Jesus’ prayer... Pray that your relationship with God will be meaningful that you may use your God-given freedom carefully and with regard to the whole of creation (especially others). The text ‘Rescue us from the evil one’, suggests we are pawns in a cosmic struggle between God and

Satan, very much like the story of Job where Job is tested almost, but not beyond his breaking point. Job will not renounce God in spite of his suffering – he chooses good over evil.

Alternatively the more familiar text that we pray in church, 'Deliver us from evil' implies that God acts to help us to be free of the agony of evil. Christians see Jesus as the one who saved us from sin, not by removing sin but exemplifying a life without sin, a life that is moral and good in every way. The 'Way' of Christ is not necessarily without suffering but it is the Way of God. Christ overcame and defeated evil.

Evil is part of the world God created in his infinite wisdom. This world may be the best possible way to the best possible world! Do you trust God – or not? It's your choice....(I believe God gave you the choice!)

For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever. (For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever).

This familiar, traditional ending to the Lord's Prayer is an addition to the biblical text; these are not the words of Jesus! I would like to think of it as the individuals' response to the preceding prayer that Christ taught his disciples. We the church, the followers of Christ, have added this doxology – praising God, humbly presenting ourselves before the creator of all things – acknowledging his sovereignty and majesty.

Jesus came amongst us, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The Kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1.15) The whole of Christ's life was a perfect example of how men should offer their life to God. His very life was a proclamation of God's kingdom. The power of God was revealed, in that the almighty became weak and vulnerable. God submitted to the limitations of man. In St Paul's words, God became sin that we might be redeemed. What power! Power exercised solely for the sake of good and fully able to resist and thus overcome evil. The total glory (honour, beauty, perfection, worthy of praise, meriting exaltation) of God is embodied in Jesus His Christ, anointed with His Holy Spirit so that in Christ, God is truly man and truly divine. Power in weakness!

Almighty, provident and eternal 'I Am', the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is three in one. The Son ever intercedes with the Father. The Spirit enables us to pray and say, "Abba, Father, your name is the name above all names. Holy. Let your kingdom become (in and through me), let your will, (not mine) be done. Lord provide me with all the simple things to sustain the life you intend for me, for you are the provider and sustainer (not me). I am unworthy, full of rebellion and my actions in the world oppose you and your kingdom – and yet if I can forgive others who oppress and hurt me, then I merit the loving forgiveness you offer. Keep me from being tested beyond my endurance, save me. Keep me far from evil. Save me, deliver me, so that where you are, in Heaven, there I might be at my end. Amen, let it be so – amen I believe. Certainly! Jesus taught us so.