

Vital signs:

prayer

Topical Bible Studies



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PRAYER

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RESOURCES

PRAYER
(Topical Bible Studies)
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Contents

	<i>Page</i>
Introduction	5
1. The privilege of prayer	6
2. Our problems with prayer	10
3. Our attitude in prayer	14
4. The content of prayer (1)	18
5. The content of prayer (2)	22
6. The content of prayer (3)	26
7. A pattern for prayer	30
8. The discipline of prayer	34
Appendix: Dr. David Secombe on The Lord's Prayer	38

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Vital Signs: Prayer

Introduction

Introducing: “Vital Signs: Prayer”

Vital signs are clinical measurements, specifically pulse rate, temperature, respiration rate, and blood pressure, that indicate the state of a patient's essential body functions.

What are the vital signs of the Christian life? How might we measure our health as Christians?

The “Vital Signs” series will explore those things in the Christian life that are indicators of, and vital for, good spiritual health.

Prayer is one such Vital Sign. The series of studies in this booklet will explore prayer from various perspectives: to whom we pray, why we don't pray, how we should pray, and what we should pray.

This is not primarily a study filled with tips for prayer, but rather one that will address the heart of every Christian, giving believers confidence and joy as they approach their Father God through the work of his beloved Son, assured of his Holy Spirit's help as they pray.

How to use this book

This booklet is designed to be used privately or corporately.

If you use it as part of a small group Bible Study, read through the comments and questions in the study that you will be going through with your group. This help you learn and contribute most.

Of greatest importance is that you will ask God to so grow your faith in him, so that you grow in prayerfulness towards him.

D.A. Carson's book, “A Call to Spiritual Reformation” has been used extensively in the preparation of this study and is well worth reading in full.

Thanks also to Dr. David Seccombe, past principal of George Whitefield College for give permission for the reproduction of his booklet in the appendix.

May God help us all as we seek to be faithful in prayer.

The privilege of prayer

Read **Luke 11:1-13**

1. To whom do Christians pray? See v.2. How do you view God?

The word “Father” is the Gospel in miniature, for only those who have received God’s grace in Christ, can call God their “Father.” To truly call God “Father” is saying that you know that Jesus died for you so that you may enjoy the same relationship with God that he himself has, meaning that God is now as wholeheartedly committed to you, as he is to Jesus. What a privilege!

Calling God “Father” means being sure of his grace and sure that he is always going to hear you, which makes your petitioning that much more open, joyous and confident. However, it also means that you have to confess your sins to him, because this wonderful God who has done all this for you and who has brought you into his family through the infinitely costly sacrifice of Jesus Christ, expects that you will obey him because of his good grace, something you don't do every day.

So to call God “Father” enhances everything we do in prayer. If you don't know that God is your Father, you will ultimately become prayerless.

2. What should we be asking our Father for, according to v.2? What does this mean?

So why don't we pray?

The heart of prayerlessness is faithlessness. Our biggest problem in being prayerful, is not that we lack discipline in prayer, but that we lack faith in God.

Think of prayer as a steam train. A steam train needs two things to run: fuel and tracks. In prayer, prayer disciplines are merely the tracks on which prayer runs. Getting up early or writing out your prayers are merely the tracks. They aren't the fuel that drives the train. The fuel that drives the train is faith in the promises of God. Living in relationship with God through the Lord Jesus Christ; knowing that you are his child, loved by him, and secure in him; trusting that he will keep his promises to you, that's the driving force behind prayer. We stop praying when we lose sight of God.

So when we are prayerless, the first thing we must address is our faith deficit. Here are a few suggestions for doing that:

1. Recall God's past grace: *When our faith is low, it is because we have forgotten the grace of God in the work of Christ on the cross. We easily forget how loved we are, that God sent his Son to die for us that we might enjoy eternal salvation. Remembering how loved we are, primes our faith engine to trust in God's future grace for whatever is causing our current unbelief.*

2. Find the blockage: *What is causing our failure to remember the grace of God? Look for fears, doubts, indulgent sinful habits, idols, unresolved anger, bitterness and disappointments. These are the things that block the grace of God from our view.*

3. Repent of unbelief: *A lack of faith is sin, so we must repent of unbelief and the causes of our unbelief. Thankfully the work of sanctification that God does in us, is largely a process of growing us towards trusting him with all our hearts.*

4. Fuel your faith engine with promises: *God's promises are the fuel that fires the engine of faith, so get your eyes off the focus of your unbelief and get them on God's grace and promises instead.*

Now pray!

Our problems with prayer

As you begin, meditate and pray around these words of the Lord's prayer:
"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name".

We ended study 1 by saying that prayerlessness is fueled by faithlessness and a failure to grasp what it means to know God as our Father. Let's consider some excuses we use to justify our failure to pray and the remedy for them.

1. I am too busy to pray.

What in society and in your life makes this an excuse you are tempted to use?

What does Jesus think of our busyness and our priorities? See Luke 10:38-42.

It matters little if you are an executive, a mother, a student or self-employed. If you are too busy to pray, you are too busy. Cut something out.

2. I feel too dry spiritually to pray.

What things may contribute to this feeling?

Prayerlessness for this reason is terrible for two reasons:

- a. our ability to pray should never be based on our feelings, but rather on the sufficiency of Christ's mediating work on the cross for us, and*
- b. our feelings or moods do not have the right to take precedence over God's command to us to be 'faithful in prayer' (Romans 12:12).*

What does Luke 18:1-8 teach us about faithfulness in prayer?

3. I feel no need to pray.

Though we would of course never speak so crassly, we often fail to commit all things to the Lord in prayer. Why is this the case?

How can we remedy this?

4. I am too bitter to pray.

“How can I be expected to pray when I have suffered so much?” Having faced injustice, pain or unfairness, real prayer is often squeezed out by resentment. How does Matthew 6:14-15 help us to pray in the midst of hardship?

In the light of the matchless forgiveness we have received because Christ bore our guilt, what conceivable right do we have to withhold forgiveness, such that we become prayerless?

5. I am too ashamed to pray.

Like Adam and Eve hid from God because of the shame of their sin, so our own shame engenders prayerlessness. Considering Romans 10:11 and Galatians 3:27. What are we to remember when we feel naked and ashamed?

What's the point anyway?

If God knows all things and has planned all things, what's the point of praying? Surely it is a waste of time if God is going to carry out his will anyway. Consider the example of evangelism. If God has already chosen those who are his, what point is there in praying for non-Christians? Or if God has determined the course of our lives, why bother praying about new jobs or passing exams or marriage partners or anything at all?

Some people answer the question by saying that prayer only changes us – it creates a change within the heart of the pray-er, but does not change reality. As I pray for peace I become a more peaceable person. While it is certainly true that prayer effects change in the pray-er this is not the whole truth, for prayer does effect change in the world. God acts in response to our prayers. God, for example, declares his intention to destroy the people of Israel, but refrains from doing so because of the prayers of Moses. James suggests there are things God does not do because we do not pray: 'You do not have, because you do not ask God'. Indeed the Bible even speaks of God himself changing in response to prayer. Amos saw God preparing locusts and fire in judgment, but in response to Amos' prayer 'the Lord relented'. God is open to the requests of his people. God responds to the prayers of his people.

Others make sense of the agency of human prayer by denying that God is sovereign or suggesting that his sovereignty is limited and that prayer (effectively then) is about giving God permission to act. The Bible, however, says that God is completely sovereign, working out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will. This includes, not just his sovereignty over the general course of history, but also over the human heart. Indeed there are some prayers – such as the request that a particular person might be converted – that make no sense if God is not sovereign over human hearts. It is because the God to whom we pray can work out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will that our prayers have such potency.

We express our belief in God's sovereignty most when we pray in the expectation that God can intervene in human lives and human history to bring about the things for which we pray. Instead of thinking of the sovereignty of God as that which impedes prayer, we should think of the sovereignty of God as the space in which prayer is made effective.

The Bible, then, claims both that God changes reality in response to our prayers and that God is sovereign. God is sovereign, but not in a way that compromises human responsibility and we are responsible, but not in a way that compromises God's sovereignty. Beyond these explicit biblical affirmations we should move cautiously. Yet, we can say that the claim that God changes reality in response to prayer need not be incompatible with his sovereignty if God's response to prayer is part of his sovereign will. Just as when God sends rain he also sends clouds as the cause of that rain, so when he ordains events he can also ordain prayer as the cause of those events. This is not a limit to his sovereignty, but the ultimate expression of it. God is able to achieve his will in response to our prayers.

Finally, when we ask why we should pray, we should not neglect the obvious answer: because God tells us to pray. God offers us prayer as a possibility and commands us to pray because he is a relational God who purposes to have a relationship with his people. It is not that God receives new data through our prayers, but that through our prayers information is clothed in love, making it communication. God has ordained that he will be affected by our loving communication with him. This is a mystery, but from eternity God has woven our prayers into the cause and effect of the universe. And so while we cannot manipulate God in prayer or twist God's arm by praying for a long time, God sovereignly chooses to use our passionate, persistent prayers as an appointed means by which things happen.

Article adapted from: <https://timchester.wordpress.com/2006/10/18/prayer-and-the-sovereignty-of-god/>

Putting it into practice

How could this passage help us in our personal prayer life, when we struggle with motivation?

How could this passage help us as we pray with our families, when we struggle to know what to pray for, or how to teach our children to pray?

How could this passage help us get over the fear we have of praying in front of others in our small groups?

How could this passage help us pray in a larger corporate setting, when non-Christians might be present also?

Now pray!

The content of prayer (1)

As you begin, meditate and pray around these words of the Lord's prayer:
"Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven".

If we follow the example of Paul, we will never overlook the monumental importance of praying for others. We will see it as part of our job description as Christians. But what should we pray for? To find the answer, we will listen in on the prayers of Paul to discover what is best to pray for as we pray for others. Just as Scripture must reform our beliefs about God, our dealings with others and our fundamental values, so too must it shape our praying.

Look up these prayers of Paul and make a few brief notes of what he is essentially praying for. Compare the results with what you normally ask for.

Romans 1:8-10

Romans 10:1

Romans 12:12

Romans 15:5-6

Romans 15:13

Romans 15:30-33

1 Corinthians 1:4-9

2 Corinthians 1:3-7

2 Corinthians 2:14-16

2 Corinthians 9:12-15

2 Corinthians 12:7-9a

2 Corinthians 13:7-9

Now pray!

The content of prayer (2)

As you begin, meditate and pray around these words of the Lord's prayer:
"Give us today our daily bread".

In the last study we listened in to the prayers of Paul, so that we might learn how to shape the content of our own prayers. It is worth saying that we should not feel limited by the content of Paul's prayers, as if we must only pray as he prays. After all, Paul himself said that we should pray "with all kinds of prayers and requests" (Ephesians 6:18). As children, who have a healthy relationship with their fathers, feel free to speak about all manner of things, so Christians can talk to their Father about anything. However, we would do well to shape our prayers around the things that are of prime importance to God.

Look up these prayers of Paul and make a few brief notes of what he is essentially praying for. Compare the results with what you normally ask for.

Ephesians 1:3-8

Ephesians 1:15-23

Ephesians 3:14-21

Ephesians 6:19-20

Philippians 1:3-6

Philippians 1:9-11

Philippians 4:6-7

Colossians 1:3-14

Colossians 4:2-4

Now pray!

The content of prayer (3)

As you begin, meditate and pray around these words of the Lord's prayer:

"Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us".

In the last two studies we have been examining what the apostle Paul prayed for when he prayed for others. However, there is something else to examine: our own hearts. We cannot pray for others effectively if we nurse resentments against them. Jesus said, "And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins" (Mark 11:25). If you are serious about reforming your prayer life, you must begin with your heart. Unconfessed sin or nurtured sin, will be a barrier between God and those he has made in his image.

Look up these prayers of Paul and make a few brief notes of what he is essentially praying for. Compare the results with what you normally ask for.

1 Thessalonians 1:2-3

1 Thessalonians 2:13-16

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

1 Thessalonians 5:23-24

2 Thessalonians 1:3-4

2 Thessalonians 1:11-12

2 Thessalonians 2:16-17

2 Thessalonians 3:2-5

1 Timothy 2:1-6

2 Timothy 1:3-7

2 Timothy 1:16-18

Philemon 4-7

Now pray!

The pattern of prayer

As you begin, meditate and pray around these words of the Lord's prayer:
"Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil".

Praying to a Heavenly Father is such a privilege! And having considered the richness and breadth of Paul's prayers for others we have much to pray about. However, finding a pattern for prayer can be difficult, and turning any part of Scripture into prayer isn't always easy. Naturally one can use the Lord's prayer as a guide, but here is another pattern to consider.

Use the 3 R's to pray through Scripture: **Rejoice, Repent, Request.**

With every verse in the Bible we can do one (or more likely, all three) of these things. We can rejoice and thank God for his character and blessings. We can repent of our mistakes and sins. We can request new mercies and help. Consider Psalm 104. Verse 1 says "Bless the Lord, O my soul! O Lord my God, you are very great! You are clothed with splendor and majesty." How might you pray through this verse? Well, at first glance you might see nothing more to do than praise God. "Dear Lord, you are very great. You are clothed with splendor and majesty. Amen." But try that again with the 3 R's.

Rejoice – O Lord, you have richly blessed me more than I deserve. What a privilege that I can call you my God and be in relationship with you because of Jesus' work for me.

Repent – Forgive me for being blind to your splendor and majesty. Though you are very great, my circumstances and disappointments often feel greater. I'm sorry for being so ungrateful and taking your blessings for granted.

Request – Give me eyes to see you, as you are. Tune my heart to sing your praise. Help me see your glory in the world you've created, in the people around me, and in the face of Christ.

Obviously, some verses lend themselves to prayer more easily than others. The Psalms are particularly prayer-worthy. But with the simple strategy of Rejoice, Repent, Request there shouldn't be a verse in the Bible that can't be used as a prompt to pray.

(Article adapted from:
<http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevindeyoung/2013/01/04/how-to-pray-using-scripture/>)

Consider the following Psalms and discuss how they might prompt prayer, and then pray!

Psalm 8

Rejoice (Thank you for ...)

Repent (Sorry that ...)

Request (Please help me to ...)

Psalm 53

Rejoice

Repent

Request

Psalm 95

Rejoice

Repent

Request

Psalm 121

Rejoice

Repent

Request

Psalm 146

Rejoice

Repent

Request

The discipline of prayer

As you begin, meditate and pray around these words of the Lord's prayer:
"For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours now and forever".

Having considered the Biblical motivation to pray, the commands to pray, as well as the content of our prayers, we can end with some practical wisdom concerning the discipline of prayer.

1. Plan to pray.

We are not committed to prayer, unless we pray; and prayer is not something we simply drift into, but must rather plan for. Paul's many references to his "prayers" suggest that he set aside specific time for prayer. Everyone will be different, but wise planning will ensure that we devote ourselves to prayer often, even if for brief periods. Where in your weekly schedule could you set aside time for prayer?

2. Help yourself concentrate.

We all struggle with lapses in concentration as we pray, so find methods that will help you stay focussed. Pray out loud. Use Biblical prayers to shape your own prayers. Keep a prayer journal, writing out your prayers and the way God has answered your previous prayers. What helps you to concentrate in prayer?

3. Develop a system for prayer lists.

It is difficult to pray faithfully for a large spread of people and concerns without developing prayer lists that help you remember them. Such lists may include: people you pray for daily, usually your family; people who you pray for weekly, perhaps close friends and those who serve in ministry at your church; and people or organisations for whom you pray for monthly, perhaps those who have asked for prayer by means of their newsletters. Scattered amongst these you may also have a list for current events in the world which should be prayed about. Operation World (www.operationworld.org) offers very helpful prayer points for a different country each day of the year. You may also like to try the PrayerMate App (<http://www.geero.net/prayermate/>) which may prove a helpful tool. How have you / do you construct your prayer lists?

4. Find a prayer partner.

If you develop this habit, always pray with someone of the same gender as you, except if you are praying with your spouse. Prayer partners help with accountability, concentration and discipline and usually widen your field of prayer, making you less selfish in prayer. What are the possible positives and negatives for meeting with someone in this way and what would be some helpful “ground rules” as you embark on praying with someone?

If you are married what has been your custom for praying together?

If you have children, what has been your approach to teaching them to pray?

Learn to pray by praying

J.I. Packer says, *“I start with the truism that each Christian’s prayer life, like every good marriage, has in it common factors about which one can generalise and also uniquenesses which no other Christian’s prayer life will quite match. You are you, and I am I, and we must each find our own way with God, and there is no recipe for prayer that can work for us like a handyman’s do-it-yourself manual or cookery book, where the claim is that if you follow the instructions you can’t go wrong. Praying is not like carpentry or cookery; it is the active exercise of a personal relationship, a kind of friendship, with the living God and his Son Jesus Christ, and the way it goes is more under divine control than under ours. Books on praying, like marriage manuals, are not to be treated with slavish superstition, as if perfection of technique is the answer to all difficulties; their purpose, rather, is to suggest things to try. But as in other relationships, so in prayer: you learn to pray by praying.”*

Discuss some of your prayer disciplines that have helped or hindered you.

Unanswered Prayer

There is no such thing as unanswered prayer! God does not ignore the requests of his beloved children, as no good father does. We may feel that he has not answered, but often that is because he has answered us by saying, “No” or “Wait”. When God refuses our request, it may be the only loving and wise thing to do for us. We will do well to trust God in his denial, or to wait patiently for him to grant our request. What does the apostle Paul teach us in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 about the correct response to unanswered prayer?

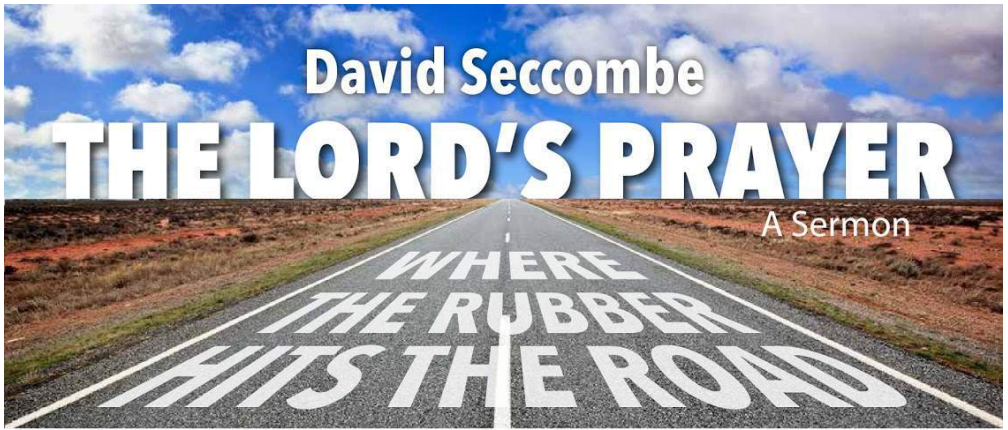
Now pray!

Thank God that you can approach him as Father.

Repent of your prayerlessness, caused by faithlessness.

Ask God:

- to teach you to pray according to his will,
- for a growing faith to drive you to prayer,
- for discipline when you come to prayer
- to help you trust his answers to your prayers.



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.**


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For more, go to my website. ~ David





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