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THE
PRAYER
OF
OUR LORD

PHILIP GRAHAM RYKEN, D. PHIL.

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The Prayer of Our Lord

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FOREWORD

This little book is about the greatest prayer in the Bible—the prayer that our Lord Jesus gave to his disciples.

But more than this, it is about the pattern for prayer that Jesus has given to you and to me, so that we may discover peace and contentment, hope and forgiveness, truth and assurance that comes from God alone through prayer.

How simple yet deeply profound the Lord's Prayer is, as we can see even in brief outline:

- The fatherhood of God (and his loving care for his children);
- The holiness of God (and his holy sacrifice for us);
- The kingdom of God (and his reign over all of life);
- The will of God (and his perfect plan for us);
- The provision of God (day by day for all our needs);
- The forgiveness of God (for all sins and the sins of others);
- The protection of God (from temptation and from Satan's power); and
- The reality of his kingdom, his power, and his glory forever.

This little book then, by God's grace, holds the promise of changing your life and my life—to help us live day by day and moment by moment in loving dependence on God. Think, for example, of the dramatic part the Lord's Prayer played in overcoming evil during the tragic events of September 11, 2001—how after Todd Beamer prayed the

Lord's Prayer, "God enabled Todd and his fellow passengers on Flight 93," as Todd's widow Lisa Beamer writes, "to take courageous actions that undoubtedly saved many lives."

May we indeed be challenged and encouraged always to pray, as Lisa writes further:

On September 11, Todd's mission on earth was completed, and he ended daring greatly. . . . Our challenge in the time remaining for us is to each day dare greatly for God, leaving lukewarm faith behind.

I covet your prayers now and in the future as my children and I face the challenges of life each day without Todd. I thank you in advance for the blessings these will bring for us.

I pray, too, as you face the challenges of each day that you will know that you are never without hope, through faith that is founded in the sovereign, loving God.¹

As you read the words of this book, may the greatest prayer of the Bible bring you deeper understanding of the living God, and of his power and his presence and his peace, so that you may "dare greatly for God, leaving lukewarm faith behind." *For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.*

Lane T. Dennis, Ph.D.
President and Publisher
Crossway Books

HOW TO PRAY

This then is how you should pray: “Our Father which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen” (Matthew 6:9-13 KJV).

OUR FAMILY PRAYER

The Lord’s Prayer is a family prayer for all God’s children. There are three important ways in which this is true. The first is the most obvious: In the Lord’s Prayer we pray to our Father. No one can learn to pray who does not learn to call God

“Father.” That is what prayer is: It is talking with our heavenly Father. Our fundamental identity as Christians is as sons and daughters of the Most High God. Therefore, when we pray, we address God as Father.

There is a second sense in which the Lord’s Prayer is a family prayer. The Father to whom we pray is called *our* Father. This means that when we pray, we are joined by our brothers and sisters. Because this is something we learn from the precise wording of the Lord’s Prayer, it is important to realize that there is more to the Lord’s Prayer than mere words. Jesus was teaching his disciples *how* to pray, not *what* to pray. He did not say, “Pray *this*,” and then give the exact words we always have to use in our prayers. Instead he said, in effect, “Pray like this,” or “Pray in this manner.”

The Lord’s Prayer is a flexible pattern or framework for prayer. Hugh Latimer, an English reformer who was martyred for his faith, said, “this prayer [is] the sum and abridgment of all other prayers. All other prayers are contained in this prayer; yea, whatsoever mankind hath need of as to soul and body, that same is contained in this prayer.”¹

Even though Jesus gave his disciples a prayer to imitate rather than a prayer to memorize, he *did* give us specific words to use when we pray. Since he undoubtedly chose his words with care, it is important to notice what he repeats over and over again: the first-person plural pronouns “our” and “us.” “Our Father.” “Give us.” “Forgive us.” “Deliver us.” The Lord’s Prayer is for the whole family of God.

Someone has written a clever poem to help remind us that the Lord's Prayer is not for rugged individualists:

*You cannot pray the Lord's Prayer
And even once say "I."
You cannot say the Lord's Prayer
And even once say "My."
Nor can you pray the Lord's Prayer
And not pray for another,
For when you ask for daily bread
You must include your brother.
For others are included
in each and every plea—
From the beginning to the end of it,
It never once says "Me!"²²*

God does not expect us to maintain the life of prayer in our own strength. Jesus knows how weak we are. Therefore, when he teaches us to pray, he invites us into fellowship. What he has given us is a family prayer, a prayer we must be taught by another Christian. Furthermore, the prayer itself assumes that we will have company when we pray. When we pray to our Father, we will be joined by our spiritual brothers and sisters.

PRAY WITH YOUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS

Jesus often took a small group of disciples with him when he went off to pray. To this day, Jesus calls his disciples to

come away in small groups to pray, for wherever two or three come together in his name, he is right there with us (Matt. 18:20).

Since the Lord's Prayer is a family prayer, we not only pray *with* one another, but we also pray *for* one another. In the last three petitions we do not pray for ourselves primarily but for the whole church.

When we say, "Give us today our daily bread," we are praying for *our daily provision*. We are asking God to meet the material needs of our brothers and sisters. Jesus taught us to pray for the needs of the family.

We are also to pray for *our daily pardon*, which is what we do when we say, "Forgive us our debts." Some sins are private sins. They are committed by an individual within the privacy of the heart. While every Christian needs to confess his or her own personal sin, other sins are corporate sins. They are committed by nations, cities, churches, or families. They are no one's fault in particular, but they are everyone's fault in general. When we pray the Lord's Prayer, we confess not only our individual sins, but especially the corporate sins of the church. What are the prevailing sins of your church? Pride? Hypocrisy? Prejudice? Greed? These are the kinds of sins that require corporate repentance.

Finally, when we say, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil," we pray for *our daily protection*. As a pastor, I offer this kind of prayer on behalf of my congregation: "Some of us will be tempted to sin today, Lord. Keep us from

falling. Provide a way of escape. Save us from sin and from Satan!” Daily provision, daily pardon, daily protection—these are the things we ask for in our family prayer.

PRAY LIKE YOUR OLDER BROTHER

There is one final sense in which the Lord’s Prayer is a family prayer. It is a prayer we learn from our Older Brother.

If we are the children of God, then Jesus Christ is our Older Brother. It only makes sense. Since Jesus is God the Son—the unique, eternally begotten Son of God (John 1:18; 3:16)—God the Father is his Father. But God the Father is also *our* Father by adoption. When we accept the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for our sins, we become the children of God. Therefore, we share the same Father with Jesus, which makes us his younger brothers and sisters.

What does this have to do with the Lord’s Prayer? It means that Jesus prays the Lord’s Prayer with us and for us. When Jesus prayed “Our Father,” he meant *our* Father, the God who is our Father as well as his. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is also our Father in heaven. The Lord’s Prayer, therefore, is the family prayer that we learn from our Older Brother.

Consider how many of these petitions were first uttered by Jesus Christ. “*Our Father which art in heaven.*” This is how Jesus always prayed. Whenever we overhear him praying in the Gospels, he addresses God as Father: “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth” (Luke 10:21); “My Father, if it is

possible, may this cup be taken from me” (Matt. 26:39). Sometimes he even says, “Holy Father” (John 17:11), which is another way of saying, “Hallowed be thy name.”

“*Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*” This was the prayer of Jesus’ whole life. “I have come down from heaven not to do my will,” he said, “but to do the will of him who sent me” (John 6:38). Jesus came to do his Father’s will on earth, as he had done it in heaven, even when it included suffering and dying for our sins on the cross. In the Garden of Gethsemane, on the eve of his crucifixion, Jesus was “overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death” (Matt. 26:38). He even asked if the cup of suffering could be taken away. “Yet,” he prayed, “not as I will, but as you will” (Matt. 26:39). In other words, “Thy will be done.” And God’s will was done! It was the will of heaven that the Son should die on the cross for sins. Therefore, when Jesus was crucified, God’s will was done on earth as it had been decreed in heaven.

“*Give us this day our daily bread.*” This, too, was Jesus’ prayer. He knew that man does not live on bread alone (Matt. 4:4), and yet he still needed to eat his daily bread. Thus we find Jesus praying at mealtimes. He looked up to heaven and prayed before he fed the five thousand (John 6:11). He did the same thing before he gave bread to his disciples at the Last Supper (Matt. 26:26). Jesus did not provide daily bread without first praying for it.

But what about “*Forgive us our debts*”? It is true that Jesus did not have any debts of his own. Yet the reason Christ came

into the world was to assume all of our debts upon the cross: “The LORD laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isa. 53:6b); “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us” (2 Cor. 5:21). When Jesus died on the cross, was he not asking his Father—at least with his actions, if not with his words—to forgive us our debts? Furthermore, even while he was asking God to forgive our debts, Jesus forgave his debtors. While they were hurling insults at him, he said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).

Jesus also taught his disciples to say, “*And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.*” Jesus prayed that we would be delivered from Satan, saying to his Father, “protect them from the evil one” (John 17:15). Jesus prayed this way for Simon Peter, knowing that he would fall under spiritual attack and deny him three times. Jesus said, “Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail” (Luke 22:31-32a).

Finally, Jesus prayed for God’s kingdom, power, and glory. The kingdom of God is what Jesus came to bring. It is what he preached and what he promised, perhaps even what he prayed for. He certainly prayed for God’s power and glory: “Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. . . . Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name” (John 17:1, 11b).

In one way or another, Jesus prayed nearly every petition in the Lord’s Prayer. He taught his disciples to pray this way because it was the way *he* prayed. Think of the Lord’s Prayer as

a “pre-owned prayer.” It comes to us second-hand, tried and tested by our Older Brother. And when Jesus made these petitions, his prayers were answered. God’s name was hallowed, his kingdom has come, and his will is being done. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God the Father forgives our debts and delivers us from the Evil One.

If God has answered the prayers of our Lord, he will answer us when we pray the Lord’s Prayer. If you are a child of God, use your family prayer. Pray with your brothers and sisters, the way your Older Brother always did. Your Father is ready to listen.

OUR FATHER IN HEAVEN

The one who taught us the most about the fatherhood of God was God's own Son, who instructed us to pray using these words: "Our Father in heaven" (Matt. 6:9). With these words, Jesus introduced a completely new way to pray. Kent Hughes writes:

God is only referred to as "Father" fourteen times in the huge corpus of the Old Testament's thirty-nine books—and then rather impersonally. In those fourteen occurrences of "Father," the term was always used with reference to the nation, and not individuals. God was spoken of as Israel's Father, but Abraham

did not speak of God as “my Father.” You can search from Genesis to Malachi, and you will not find such an occurrence.¹

Jesus was the first person to make the fatherhood of God so essential to prayer. He calls God “Father” some sixty times in the Gospels. Calling God “Father” was the heart of the prayer life of Jesus Christ as it was for no one before him.

ABBA, FATHER

Jesus was also the first to employ the precise word that he used when he addressed his Father. It was the word Jewish children used for their fathers: *abba*. In fact, *abba* was almost certainly the word that Jesus himself used for his father Joseph when he was working in his carpentry shop back in Nazareth.

The word *abba* was picked up by the apostles and used by the first Christians when they prayed. This was a completely new development in the history of prayer. There is no record of anyone else ever having addressed God in such a familiar way. It may have seemed rather presumptuous. Who did Jesus think he was, calling God his Father? Of course Jesus knew exactly who he was . . . the eternal Son of God. Therefore, he prayed, “*Abba, Father,*” addressing God in a way that no one else would dare.

The way Jesus prayed was remarkable. What is more remarkable is that he made it possible for us to pray the same

way. First, he made us God's sons and daughters: "To all who received him [Jesus], to those who believed in his name, he [God] gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:12). By trusting in Jesus Christ to save us from sin and death, we are born again as children of God. We are adopted into God's family.

Once we become children of God, the Holy Spirit enables us to call God Father: "Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba, Father'" (Gal. 4:6).

PRAY WITH CONFIDENCE

How does a child speak to his father? Children who love their fathers approach them with both the warmest confidence and the deepest reverence. Both of these attitudes are expressed in the Lord's Prayer—confidence and reverence for God the Father.

First, when we pray to God as our Father, we draw near to him with confidence. This confidence comes from intimacy, from knowing that our Father is also our friend.

Sadly, fathers are not always known for intimacy. We are now living in what David Blankenhorn calls *Fatherless America*.² Some fathers are absent; they have abandoned their families. Other fathers are weak; they fail to provide spiritual leadership in the home. Still others are distant; they do not show affection to their families. So we have forgotten, perhaps, who a father is and what he does. But a real father is a man

who has a passionate love for his family. Because of the warmth of his affection—not only for his children, but especially for their mother—his children have the confidence to ask him for what they need.

Some people find it difficult to approach God with confidence because they have never known a father's love. In the providence of God, they never had a father who blessed them. He was absent, he was detached and disapproving, or he was angry and violent. As a result, nearly the last thing they want to do is to give their heart to someone they have to call "Father."

Yet Jesus teaches us to call God "our Father," and to do so with confidence, even if we have never known a father's love. This is because Jesus knows that a father's love is what we have always longed for. He invites us to become God's beloved children. He teaches us to speak to him as our dear Father. That may be difficult at first, but as we learn to pray to God as our Father, we experience the healing that only the Father's love can bring.

PRAY WITH REVERENCE

Jesus teaches us to pray "*Abba*, Father" so that we will come to God with the confidence of a child. But we do not approach God without reverence. He is our Father in heaven. He dwells in a high and lofty place of majesty, power, and dominion, where he is worshiped by myriads upon myriads of angels.

This fact ought to make a great difference when we pray. Christians sometimes forget that the fatherhood of God demands their reverence. It is often said that the best translation of the Aramaic word *abba* is something like “daddy.” After all, “daddy” is the word small children use for their fathers in English. If *abba* is the word small children used for their fathers in Aramaic, then “daddy” it is.

However, *abba* does not mean “daddy.” The Oxford linguist James Barr has proven that *abba* was not merely a word used by small children.³ It was also the word that Jewish children used for their parents after they were fully grown. *Abba* was a mature, yet affectionate way for adults to speak to their fathers.⁴

The New Testament is careful not to be too casual in the way it addresses God. The Aramaic word *abba* appears three times in the English New Testament (Mark 14:36; Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6). In each case, it is followed immediately by the Greek word *pater*. *Pater* is not the Greek word for “daddy.” The Greek language has a word for “daddy”—the word *pappas*—but that is not the word the New Testament uses to translate *abba*. Instead, in order to make sure that our intimacy with God does not become an excuse for immaturity, it says, “*abba, pater.*”

The best way to translate *abba* is “Dear Father,” or even “Dearest Father.” That phrase captures both the warm confidence and the deep reverence that we have for our Father in heaven. It expresses our intimacy with God, while still pre-

serving his dignity. When we pray, therefore, we are to say, “Our dear Father in heaven.”

WHAT ARE FATHERS FOR?

We come to God with both reverence and confidence. But what do we come *for*? We come for what children usually come to their fathers for. In the last petitions of the Lord’s Prayer, we ask for exactly the kinds of things that children ask from their fathers: provision, pardon, and protection.

First, we pray for *provision*. We beg God, “Give us today our daily bread.” Providing daily bread is part of a father’s job. He is the breadwinner. He is a “good provider,” people say. God the Father is not only a good provider; he is the best provider of all.

Second, we ask our Father for *pardon*. We pray, “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matt. 6:12). Granting pardon is also part of a father’s job. When children are really naughty, they usually have to answer to their fathers.

Jesus once told a story about a son who returned to his father to ask for pardon (Luke 15:11-32). The key to the whole story is the first word out of the son’s mouth: “Father.” “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you’” (Luke 15:21). What gave the son the confidence to go home and seek pardon for his sins was that he was going home to his father.

In much the same way, it is the fatherhood of God that

gives us the confidence to ask God to pardon our sins. Like the wayward son, we say, “Father, I have sinned against you.” This is part of the logic of the Lord’s Prayer. We would never have the courage to ask God to forgive us our debts (in the fifth petition) unless we already knew that we could call him our Father (from the opening address). The reason we pray to God as our Father—and the reason our Father will forgive us—is because Jesus has paid for our sins through his death on the cross.

Finally, we pray for *protection*. We ask our Father to “lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one” (Matt. 6:13). In making this petition, we are asking God to defend us from sin and from Satan. Defending the family is another part of a father’s responsibility. He is a protector as well as a provider.

Everything we really need—provision, pardon, protection—depends on the fatherhood of God. God is our loving Father, and so he is willing to help us. He is our Father in heaven, with infinite resources at his disposal. So he is also able to help us. Now Jesus invites us to draw near to him, confidently and reverently, asking him for what we need and calling him, “Dearest Father.”

NOTES

FOREWORD

- 1 Quoted from Lisa Beamer's Foreword in *A Reason for Hope* (Wheaton, IL.: Crossway Books, 2001), pp. 10, 11.

CHAPTER 1: HOW TO PRAY

- 1 Hugh Latimer, quoted in Spiros Zodhiates, *The Lord's Prayer*, rev. ed. (Chattanooga, Tenn.: AMG, 1991), 28.
- 2 Zodhiates, vii.

CHAPTER 2: OUR FATHER IN HEAVEN

- 1 R. Kent Hughes, *Abba Father: The Lord's Pattern for Prayer* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1986), 17-18.
- 2 David Blankenhorn, *Fatherless America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995).
- 3 James Barr, "Abba Isn't 'Daddy,'" *Journal of Theological Studies*, 39 (1988): 28-47.
- 4 Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church Under Persecution*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994), 105.