



“LORD, TEACH US TO PRAY”

The altar of incense was really part of the furniture of the Most Holy Place (Hebrews 9:3,4 RV mg), but it was placed immediately outside the veil, that it might be used every day. Thus, morning and evening, that same sweet fragrance in which the High Priest enveloped himself on entering into the presence of God on the Day of Atonement filled the outer tabernacle and “entered into that which is within the veil” No doubt the Divine selection of the ingredients and the art of the apothecary in compounding them (Exodus 30:34-38) ensured that the odour of the early offering did not die away before the nightly renewal, that no part of day or night should be free from sacredness.

Incense represents the prayers of the saints (Rev 5:8; 8:3,4; Psalm 141:2), the means by which God’s people draw nigh to His presence to offer praise, thanksgiving and worship and to receive His blessing and forgiveness of their sins. The sweet savour is the result of the work of Christ, for it is he who has appeared in the actual presence of God for us, where he has taken his seat at the right hand of the Father. He is the Apostle and High Priest of our profession, making intercession for us.

It is appropriate, then, that disciples individually and as a community should take careful note of Christ’s answer to the request, “Lord, teach us to pray” The pattern which he gave is the complete guide to the manner of our approach and the intent of our prayers. Though, for fear of vain repetition, we may not regularly use its words, to follow its spirit is to accept a discipline in prayer. It will help us to a true blend of supplication, thanksgiving and request, and will offer help in practical aspects of our prayers.

“Our Father”

God is described as a father to Israel, because He had redeemed them (Deut 32:6; Isa 63:16). In the Psalms God is compared to a merciful father who pities his children, because He is willing to forgive iniquity. The privilege of actually calling upon God as Father, however, was reserved for God’s firstborn Son (Psalm 89:26,27), the Lord Jesus who was the first to use that intimate yet deeply reverential form of address. Those who through him have received “the spirit of adoption” as God’s sons, can also cry “Abba, Father”.

So the Lord Jesus Christ, on whose lips the name of Father represented the holy memorial name which was being fulfilled in him (Matt 11:25 with Psalm 8:1,2; Luke

22:46 with Psalm 31:5), teaches us to draw near with reverence and godly fear, yet to a throne of grace. The fact of having God as our Father should stir us to pray for greater understanding of His love and care for us, as well as of His will that we may obey Him (1 Peter 1:13-21).

“Which art in heaven”

God is in heaven and we upon earth; therefore we should not be rash with our mouth or hasty in our heart, but let our words be few (Eccls 5:2). His ways are higher than our ways and His thoughts than our thoughts. Therefore, in seeking Him we forsake our own ways and our own thoughts in an effort to turn to Him (Isa 55:6-9). But His mercy is also as great as the heavens are high above the earth, and high and lofty though He is, **He has respect** to them that are poor and of a contrite spirit, that tremble at His word (Isa 66:1,2). Thus prayer brings comfort and consolation in distress.

It is difficult, especially in private prayer, to concentrate all our thoughts upon God. Sometimes, however, if we avoid uttering words of our own until well-remembered Scriptures, such as those alluded to above have flooded our mind, this can help to draw forth from our own heart a meditation which merges into prayer.

“Hallowed be Thy Name”

This is the first petition. It is what, above all, a son or daughter of the living God should seek. Let us not be deceived by the modernisation of the Lord’s Prayer here. Our prayer is not “Holy is Thy Name” true though that statement is. It is a heartfelt response, in whatever form we utter that prayer, to our realisation that our Father’s Name is holy, and that He *will* be sanctified in them that draw near Him (Lev 10:2). It is a prayer for personal sanctification, for help to understand God’s ways that we may sanctify Him in our hearts and in our community. It is a prayer that we may be more dedicated and thus God be glorified. So it precedes all other requests since this above all we seek, and earnestly desire that all men should hallow the Name of Him who is our Father. It should provide a stimulus for our preaching of His righteousness and judgement, and of the day when the knowledge of the glory of the Lord *shall* cover the earth as the waters cover the sea.

“Thy Kingdom come”

With such a request we pray for the consummation of this purpose, when our Father’s authority will be recognised everywhere. We both acknowledge His law as supreme for us now, and pray for the repentance of Israel, the return of Christ and the peace of the nations. For these are prayers both for the glorifying of God’s name and the end of creation’s groaning and travailing together in pain until now. It is “all our salvation and all our desire”, (2 Samuel 23:1-5).

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

This request is a recognition of human frailty and of the sin of the world: God’s will is not yet done on earth as it is in heaven. It acknowledges the supreme necessity for death and resurrection — “Lo, I come to do Thy will, O God” —and the duty of

disciples to offer themselves likewise without reserve in God's service, to surrender their own wills to Him. To do so is the very essence of personal holiness, and the prayer is an expression of longing for the day when that sanctification is complete, and our hearts are established "unblameable in holiness before God, even our Father, at the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints". There is comfort in "gentle resignation" to the Father's will, and renewal of hope in the time of restitution of all things.

"Give us this day our daily bread"

Here we have the first purely personal request. In it can be comprehended all we wish to ask for ourselves—for the necessities of life, for guidance in the choice of career, for help with specific problems, all the details that make up daily life, with its anxieties and perplexities.

Is there anything too trivial to express in prayer? Is it improper to make certain requests? Or hopeless to attempt to change events? All depends upon our grasp of what has gone before in the Lord's pattern prayer. "If we ask anything according to His will, he heareth us" The prayer for bread day by day is an expression of confidence and trust. It recognises the priorities of God's service —**His** holiness, **His** Name, **His** Kingdom, **His** will. While we seek them first, He gives us **our** daily bread (Matt 6:24-34).

This thought will discipline us in deciding what we should ask for. Can we sanctify it in prayer? Is it *purely* for ourselves—for success to stimulate self satisfaction, for wealth to: consume upon our pleasure, for ease of mind that allows us to ignore the realities of suffering and service? Will the spirit of our request be such that, having gained it, we can then ignore the Giver? If so, then no matter how great it seemed, the request is trivial. But with a contrite spirit the smallest petition is an expression of a true relationship between the Father and His children.

"Forgive us our debts"

Luke (11:4) confirms that the debts here are moral ones: "forgive us our **sins**" The very desire to hallow our Father's Name makes us conscious of shortcoming —of coming "short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Yet such prayer is a release from any morbid obsession with guilt. It is to our Father we pray, to Him who "knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust" (Psalm 103:8-14). Therefore our prayer acknowledges our debt and the price of our redemption, even the precious blood of Christ. It brings us closer, "in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience" (Heb 10:22).

We should pray also to be quickened in our understanding and perception of these things, in their practical outworking in daily life, "because it is written, Be ye holy: for I (the Father on whom we call) am holy" (1 Peter 1:14-21).

"As we forgive our debtors"

Matthew's version (in the Greek) suggests that even as we pray *we have already forgiven*. The idea is consistent with our reverential approach to our Father in heaven,

whose thoughts are not our thoughts. The knowledge of what sin is, the true nature of His love and of the forgiveness we seek can best, indeed can only, be appreciated if we have made the effort to understand the failings of others, especially when we are most affected by them. The act of prayer for the ability to have compassion and to commit all judgement into our Father's hands is both a discipline and a comfort. When coupled with the request for our own forgiveness it enables us the more readily to "remember them that are in bonds, *as bound with them*; and them that suffer adversity, *as being ourselves also in the body*" (Heb 13:3). Such prayer leads on to a sense of fellowship with all who labour in God's service, and a joining with them by means of our prayers on their behalf.

This is the prayer of the humble, contrite spirit: *put us not to the test*. Even though we can rely upon the promise that the trials to which God puts us are not beyond our strength, that there is a way of deliverance, and there is a crown of life for him that overcometh, we do not presume to have attained. (1 Cor 10:13; James 1:12). By grace we are saved, and that not of ourselves, and we have only to contemplate the Lord in Gethsemane to realise that it is both a natural and an innocent thing to shrink from trial. We also see the force of his advice to "watch and pray, that you may never face a trial such as this" (Matt 26:41, freely translated).

"But deliver us from evil"

Testing does come, however, afterward bringing blessedness for him who endures it. It is a mark of the Son of God that he should have this experience (James 1:12; Heb. 12:6-11). So trial can bring its own comfort and assurance, when we pray that its result may be nothing but good. "Evil" in the Lord's Prayer is not primarily the danger, pain or discomfort which attends the daily life of man. It is right that we should commit into our Father's hands our going out and in, and cry to Him for release from suffering for ourselves and others. The answer may sometimes be, "My grace is sufficient for thee". But evil is what men do that is contrary to God, the effects of which could impair in any way our relationship with our Father in heaven.

So we make "supplication, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks... for all men; for kings, and for all that are in authority: that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty". Paul attached special importance to such prayers "first of all," (1 Tim 2:1), not forgetting the sense of gratitude with which such Divine control on our behalf should be received. To pray thus is to recognise once more the sovereign majesty of our Father who is our true Saviour.

No doubt the Lord's Prayer provided a pattern for Paul's own life and thought, as he preached the gospel of repentance, salvation and the kingdom to come, spreading abroad "the sweet savour of Christ" (2 Cor 2:14-16). No doubt, also, he accepted its discipline in his own prayer, supplications and thanksgiving as he made known his requests to God. At any rate (in 2 Tim 4:14-18) he has shown us in his own experience the practical effect of absorbing its spirit. To the Lord he committed the judgement of a man who did him much evil; he sought the forgiveness of those who seemed to have failed him in time of need; he asked for, and received, strength in a time of crisis; for Paul's whole desire was to extend the knowledge of God committed to him; and in his deliverance from a particular peril he saw the evidence that the Lord would "deliver me from every evil work and will preserve me unto his heavenly

kingdom; to whom be glory for ever and ever, Amen”.

A fitting conclusion to a life and to a prayer. For prayer is the presentation before our heavenly Father of our life in all its aspects, both private and communal, sanctified by the High Priest who is our mediator, and dedicated to the glory of God’s Name. And when “we know not what we should pray for as we ought... the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered” (Romans 8:26-28).

“For Thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever: Amen”

Appendix of Prayer Themes

Prayer based upon the word of God can never be wrong and the following Prayer Themes are based on things for which Scripture exhorts us to pray and give God thanks or on examples of the prayers of faithful men.

The list is not intended to be fully comprehensive. It contains simply suggestion which may be used with benefit in private or ecclesial prayer. Each theme is accompanied by a Scripture reference which should be read carefully and thoughtfully first and then a prayer built up around it.

The suggestions are commended in the hope that they may be a blessing to us and a praise to our Heavenly Father.

1. For help in daily Bible reading, for wisdom and understanding in God’s ways (Psalm 119:18; Jas 1:5).
2. For help to better appreciate God’s love and the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ for us (Matt 26:36-44).
3. For a better understanding of the life of Christ and for help in copying him and practising its virtues (Phil 2:5-8).
4. For constant committing of ourselves to God and an awareness of living daily with Christ (John 17:9-11, 20-21).
5. To offer ourselves unreservedly to God to be used by Him (Isaiah 6:8; 1 Sam 3:10).
6. For the return of Christ to glorify God (Rev 22:20).
7. For awareness of the signs about us that herald Christ’s coming, for a sense of urgency and watchfulness (Mark 13:33-37).
8. For a greater concern for our brethren and sisters, for unity and harmony within the brotherhood and for help to serve them in the spirit of Christ (1 Sam. 12:22-24; 1 Cor 12:25-27).

9. For more labourers in the harvest to magnify God's name (Matt 9:36-38).
10. For the repentance of Israel (Psalm 122:6-9).
11. For concern for the dying in the world, for help to be awake to preaching opportunities and for a blessing in preaching (Gen 18:23-33; 2 Thess 3:1-2).
12. For kings and rulers and the mercy that will account us worthy to escape the coming tribulation (Luke 21:36; 1 Tim 2:1-3).

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