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Author of THE REASON FOR GOD and THE PRODIGAL GOD

TIMOTHY
KELLER

Prayer



Experiencing
Awe and Intimacy with God

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*To Dick Kaufmann,
friend and man of prayer*

EIGHT

The Prayer of Prayers

None of our three master teachers of prayer, Augustine, Luther, and Calvin, developed their instruction primarily based on their own experiences. In each case, what they believed and practiced regarding prayer grew mainly out of their understanding of the ultimate master class in prayer—the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew 6:9–13, in the heart of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. The greatest part of Calvin’s chapter 20 on prayer in the *Institutes* is given to a line-by-line study of Jesus’ own model for prayer, as is much of Luther’s classic letter. Each of these three great theologians expounded the Lord’s Prayer at length in more than one place, not only in biblical commentaries and exegetical works, but also in pastoral and theological writings.¹⁹²

In this chapter we will look at the Lord’s Prayer through the insights of our three master teachers, thereby drawing out the fullness of their wisdom—and the depths of Jesus’ prayer itself—on this subject.

The Prayer of Prayers

The Danger of Familiarity

The Lord’s Prayer may be the single set of words spoken more often than any other in the history of the world. Jesus Christ gave it to us as the key to unlock all the riches of prayer. Yet it is an untapped resource, partially because it is so very familiar.

Imagine you are, for the first time, visiting someone who has a home or an apartment near train tracks. You are sitting there in conversation, when suddenly the train comes roaring by, just a few feet from where you are sitting, and you jump to your feet in alarm. “What’s that?” you cry. Your friend, the resident of the house, responds, “What was what?” You answer, “That sound! I thought something was coming through the wall.” “Oh, that,” she says. “That’s just the train. You know, I guess I’ve gotten so used to it that I don’t even notice it anymore.” With wide eyes you say, “I don’t see how that is possible.” But it is.

It is the same with the Lord’s Prayer. The whole world is starving for spiritual experience, and Jesus gives us the means to it in a few words. Jesus is saying, as it were, “Wouldn’t you like to be able to come face-to-face with the Father and king of the universe every day, to pour out your heart to him, and to sense him listening to and loving you?” We say, of course, *yes*.

Jesus responds, “It’s all in the Lord’s Prayer,” and we say, “In the *what?*” It’s so familiar we can no longer hear it. Yet everything we need is within it. How do we overcome the deadly peril of familiarity? One of the best ways is to listen to these three great mentors, who plumbed the depths of the prayer through years of reflection and practice. What did they believe the Lord’s Prayer to be saying?

“Our Father Who Art in Heaven”

This is called the address, not actually one of the petitions. Calvin explains that to call God “Father” is to pray in Jesus’ name. “Who would break forth into such rashness as to claim for himself the honor of a son of God unless we had been adopted as children of grace in Christ?”¹⁹³ Luther also believed the address was a call to not plunge right into talking to God but to first recollect our situation and realize our standing in Christ before we proceed into prayer. We are to say to God, “You have taught us to regard you and call upon you as one Father of us all . . . although . . . you could rightly and properly be a severe judge over us.” Therefore, we should start by asking God to “implant in our hearts a comforting trust in your fatherly love.”¹⁹⁴ Calvin agrees that “by the great sweetness of this name [Father] he frees us from all distrust.”¹⁹⁵

“Hallowed Be Thy Name”

This first petition is somewhat opaque to contemporary English speakers. One reason is that the word *hallowed* is seldom used today, and another is that the idea of holiness (the basic meaning of the older English word *hallowed*) is alien in our secularized society. The third is a seeming problem of logic, expressed by Luther. “What are we praying for when we ask that His name become holy? Is it not holy already?” He immediately answers that of course it is holy, but that “in our use of it his name is not kept holy.”¹⁹⁶ Luther points to the fact that all baptized Christians have God’s name put upon them. As name bearers they represent a good and holy God, and so we are praying that God keep us from dishonoring the name by which we are called,

that he would empower us to become ourselves good and holy. This petition, however, has a second meaning for Luther, who joins Augustine when he says it is a prayer that God “be glorified among all nations as you are glorified among us.”¹⁹⁷ It is a request that faith in God would spread throughout the world, that Christians would honor God with the Christ-likeness or holiness of their lives, and that more and more people would honor God and call on his name.

Calvin agrees but adds a thought that goes deep into the heart. “What is more unworthy than for God’s glory to be obscured partly by our ungratefulness?” In other words, ingratitude and an indifferent attitude toward God fails to honor his name. To “hallow” God’s name is not merely to live righteous lives but to have a heart of grateful joy toward God—and even more, a wondrous sense of his beauty. We do not revere his name unless he “captivate[s] us with wonderment for him.”¹⁹⁸

“Thy Kingdom Come”

Augustine says God is reigning now, but just as a light is absent to those refusing to open their eyes, so it is possible to refuse God’s rule.¹⁹⁹ This is the cause of all our human problems, since we were created to serve him, and when we serve other things in God’s place, all spiritual, psychological, cultural, and even material problems ensue. Therefore, we need his kingdom to “come.” Calvin believed there were two ways God’s kingdom comes—through the Spirit, who “corrects our desires,” and through the Word of God, which “shapes our thoughts.”²⁰⁰ This, then, is a “Lordship” petition: It is asking God to extend his royal power over every part of our lives—emotions, desires, thoughts, and commitments. It is reminiscent of Thomas Cranmer’s

“collect” for the fourteenth Sunday after Trinity, “that we may obtain that which thou dost promise, make us to love that which thou dost command.” We are asking God to so fully rule us that we *want* to obey him with all our hearts and with joy.

Luther adds also an outward and a future dimension. The reign of God on earth is only partial now, but the fullness of the future kingdom is unimaginable. All suffering, injustice, poverty, and death will be ended. To pray “thy kingdom come” is to “yearn for that future life” of justice and peace, and to ask that “your future kingdom may be the end and consummation of the kingdom you have begun in us.”²⁰¹

“Thy Will Be Done”

Luther is the most vivid and forthright about the meaning of the third petition. He paraphrases like this: “Grant us grace to bear willingly all sorts of sickness, poverty, disgrace, suffering, and adversity and to recognize that in this your divine will is crucifying our will.”²⁰² We may be reticent to make such a bold statement, but now we can discern the importance of the initial address. Unless we are profoundly certain God is our Father, we will never be able to say “thy will be done.” Fathers are often inscrutable to little children. A four-year-old cannot understand many of his father’s prohibitions—but he trusts him. Only if we trust God as Father can we ask for grace to bear our troubles with patience and grace.

Well, someone asks, how can we be sure God is trustworthy? The answer is that this is the one part of the Lord’s Prayer Jesus himself prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, under circumstances far more crushing than any of us will ever face. He submitted to his Father’s will

rather than following his own desires, and it saved us. That’s why we can trust him. Jesus is not asking us to do anything for him that he hasn’t already done for us, under conditions of difficulty beyond our comprehension.

Luther adds, following Augustine, that without this trust in God, we will try to take God’s place and seek revenge on those who have harmed us.²⁰³ We will be protected “from the horrible vices of character assassination, slander, backbiting . . . condemning others” only if we learn to commit ourselves to God.²⁰⁴ If we can’t say “thy will be done” from the bottom of our hearts, we will never know any peace. We will feel compelled to try to control people and control our environment and make things the way we believe they ought to be. Yet to control life like this is beyond our abilities, and we will just dash ourselves upon the rocks. This is why Calvin adds that to pray “thy will be done” is to submit not only our wills to God but even our feelings, so that we do not become despondent, bitter, and hardened by the things that befall us.²⁰⁵

We have considered the first three petitions of the Lord’s Prayer. All our teachers observe the significance of their place in the order—that these petitions come first in prayer. The beginning of prayer is all about God. We are not to let our own needs and issues dominate prayer; rather, we are to give pride of place to praising and honoring him, to yearning to see his greatness and to see it acknowledged everywhere, and to aspiring to full love and obedience. George Herbert expressed it with beautiful economy:

For my heart’s desire
Unto Thine is bent:
I aspire
To a full consent.²⁰⁶

Adoration and thanksgiving—God-centeredness—comes first, because it heals the heart of its self-centeredness, which curves us in on ourselves and distorts all our vision. Now that the prayer is nearly half over, and our vision is reframed and clarified by the greatness of God, we can turn to our own needs and those of the world.

“Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread”

Augustine reminds us that “daily bread” is a metaphor for necessities rather than luxuries. Since we have just spent the first three petitions of prayer recognizing God as our true food, wealth, and happiness, Jesus is charging us to now bring our “prayer list” of needs into line with this new frame of heart. As we have seen, Augustine believes the full petition should be Proverbs 30:8, “Give me neither poverty (lest I resent you) or riches (lest I forget you).”²⁰⁷ Calvin follows Augustine’s reasoning when he says that, in speaking of our daily bread, “we do not . . . bid farewell to God’s glory . . . [but we] ask only what is expedient for him.”²⁰⁸ We come with our needs expectant of positive response, but we do so changed by our satisfaction in him and our trust of him. We do not come arrogantly and anxiously telling him what *has* to happen. Many things we would have otherwise agonized over, we can now ask for without desperation.

Luther sees a social dimension to this prayer as well. For all to get daily bread, there must be a thriving economy, good employment, and a just society. Therefore, to pray “give us—all the people of our land—daily bread” is to pray against “wanton exploitation” in business, trade, and labor, which “crushes the poor and deprives them of their daily bread.” Ominously he warns those who do injustice about the power of this petition. “Let them beware of . . . the intercession of the church,

and let them take care that this petition of the Lord’s Prayer does not turn against them.”²⁰⁹ For Luther, then, to pray for our daily bread is to pray for a prosperous and just social order.

“Forgive Us Our Debts as We Forgive Our Debtors”

The fifth petition concerns our relationships, both with God and others. Luther, who for years struggled mightily and personally with the issues of guilt and pardon, gives a clarion call to seek God’s forgiveness every day in prayer:

If anyone insists on his own goodness and despises others . . . let him look into himself when this petition confronts him. He will find he is no better than others and that in the presence of God everyone must duck his head and come into the joy of forgiveness only through the low door of humility.²¹⁰

Luther adds that this petition is not only a challenge to our pride but a test of spiritual reality. If we find confession and repentance intolerably traumatic or demeaning, it means “the heart is not right with God and cannot draw . . . confidence from his Gospel.” If regular confession does not produce an *increased* confidence and joy in your life, then you do not understand the salvation by grace, the essence of the faith.

Jesus tightly links our relationship with God to our relationship with others. It works two ways. If we have not seen our sin and sought radical forgiveness from God, we will be unable to forgive and to seek the good of those who have wronged us. So unresolved bitterness is a

sign that we are not right with God. It also means that if we are holding a grudge, we should see the hypocrisy of seeking forgiveness from God for sins of our own. Calvin puts it vividly:

If we retain feelings of hatred in our hearts, if we plot revenge and ponder any occasion to cause harm, and even if we do not try to get back into our enemies' good graces, by every sort of good office deserve well of them, and commend ourselves to them, by this prayer we entreat God not to forgive our sins.²¹¹

"Lead Us Not into Temptation"

With this petition Augustine makes an important distinction. He says, "The prayer is not that we should not be tempted, but that we should not be brought [or led] *into* temptation."²¹² Temptation in the sense of being tried and tested is not only inevitable but desirable. The Bible talks of suffering and difficulty as a furnace in which many impurities of soul are "burned off" and we come to greater self-knowledge, humility, durability, faith, and love. However, to "*enter into* temptation," as Jesus termed it (Matt 26:41), is to entertain and consider the prospect of giving in to sin. Calvin lists two categories of temptations from the "right" and from the "left." From the right comes "riches, power, and honors," which tempt us into the sin of thinking we do not need God. From the left comes "poverty, disgrace, contempt, and afflictions," which tempt us to despair, to lose all hope, and to become angrily estranged from God.²¹³ Both prosperity and adversity, then, are sore tests, and each one brings its own set of enticements away

from trusting in God and toward centering your life on yourself and on "inordinate desires" for other things.²¹⁴

"Deliver Us from Evil"

Calvin combined this phrase with "lead us not into temptation" and called it the sixth and last petition. Augustine and Luther, however, viewed "deliver us from evil" as a separate, seventh petition. It can also be translated "deliver us from the Evil One," that is, the devil. Luther writes that this petition is "directed against specific evils that emanate from the devil's kingdom . . . poverty, dishonor, death, in short . . . everything that threatens our bodily welfare."²¹⁵ Augustine indicates that while the sixth petition is for deliverance from the remaining evil inside us, this seventh petition is for protection from evil outside us, from malignant forces in the world, especially our enemies who wish to do us harm.²¹⁶

"For Thine Is the Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory Forever"

Finally, there is what is called the ascription: "For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, forever. Amen." Augustine does not mention it because it was not in most earlier manuscripts of the Bible or in the Latin Vulgate. Luther does not treat it. However, Calvin, while noting that "this is not extant in the Latin versions," believes that "it is so appropriate to this place that it ought not to be omitted." After descending into our needs, troubles, and limitations, we return to the truth of God's complete sufficiency. Here our hearts can end with "tranquil repose" in the remembrance that nothing can ever

snatch away the kingdom, power, and glory from our heavenly, loving Father.²¹⁷

“Give, Forgive, and Deliver—Us”

The concluding remarks on the Lord’s Prayer by John Calvin are especially helpful. Like Luther in *A Simple Way to Pray*, Calvin insists that the Lord’s Prayer does not bind us to its particular form of words but rather to its content and basic pattern. Indeed, even Luke does not set down Jesus’ teaching on prayer in exactly the same words. The Lord’s Prayer is a summary of all other prayers, providing essential guidance on emphasis and topics, on purpose and even spirit. Therefore in our prayers, “the words may be utterly different, yet the sense ought not to vary.”²¹⁸ The Lord’s Prayer must stamp itself on our prayers, shaping them all the way down. There could be no better way to ensure that than Luther’s twice-daily exercise of paraphrasing and personalizing the Lord’s Prayer as introduction to more free-form praise and petition.

An equally important insight is a reminder that the Lord’s Prayer was given to us in plural form. *We* ask God to give *us* what we need, meaning that, as much as possible, “the prayers of Christians ought to be public . . . to the advancement of the believer’s fellowship.”²¹⁹ American theologian Michael S. Horton has pointed out that Calvin believed “public ministry shapes private devotion, not vice versa.”²²⁰ Calvin took great care to define public prayers and the liturgy because he wanted private prayers to be strongly shaped by the corporate worship of the Christian church.

Prayer is therefore not a strictly private thing. As much as we can, we should pray with others both formally in gathered worship and

informally. Why? If the substance of prayer is to continue a conversation with God, and if the purpose of it is to know God better, then this can happen best in community.

C. S. Lewis argues that it takes a community of people to get to know an individual person. Reflecting on his own friendships, he observed that some aspects of one of his friend’s personality were brought out only through interaction with a second friend. That meant if he lost the second friend, he lost the part of his first friend that was otherwise invisible. “By myself I am not large enough to call the whole man into activity; I want other lights than my own to show all his facets.”²²¹ If it takes a community to know an ordinary human being, how much more necessary would it be to get to know Jesus alongside others? By praying with friends, you will be able to hear and see facets of Jesus that you have not yet perceived.

That is why, Lewis thinks, that the angels in Isaiah 6 are crying, “Holy, Holy, Holy” *to one another*. Each angel is communicating to all the rest the part of the glory it sees. Knowing the Lord is communal and cumulative, we must pray and praise together. That way “the more we share the Heavenly Bread between us, the more we shall all have.”²²²