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The Lord's Prayer: A Study in Christian Theology

It is a sad truth, though not surprising, that Christians with little understanding of their Christian faith often have great difficulty maintaining their faith. It is equally true that the last kind of sermon most Christians want to hear is one full of theology; that is, they do not want to develop a deeper understanding of Christianity. This is a recipe for a crisis of belief that often leads to giving up one's faith, especially when a personal tragedy occurs such as the loss of a loved one, loss of a job, loss of financial security, disappointment with other Christians, or even discouragement with the condition of the world in which we live.

I am afraid there is no remedy for this problem short of studying Christian theology. This is so important that our Lord Jesus Christ instructed His followers to dwell on the basic theology of our faith when he asserted that we should daily pray the prayer he taught His disciples. Christians may be surprised to learn that the Lord's Prayer is not a magic incantation of perfect words, but an exercise in understanding Christian theology while we ask the all-powerful God of the universe to listen to our pleas.¹ In other words, if all we do when praying the Lord's Prayer is mouth the words without a deep understanding of the meaning, we have become the very thing Jesus told us not to be: Gentiles (heathen or pagans). Matthew tells us that Jesus said, "And in praying do not heap up *empty phrases* [italics mine] as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard for their many words" (Matthew 6:7). Let us study, then, the theology, the meaning, of the Lord's Prayer.

We find Jesus' prayer in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. And so the Lord's Prayer is Scripture, is attested by two apostles, and comes from Jesus Christ himself, hence the title. And while scholars, in the manner of scholars, quibble about this or that origin of the gospels, the remarkable thing about the Lord's Prayer is its consistency and simplicity over time. And yet, it reveals some of the

¹Nijay K. Gupta, *The Lord's Prayer* (Macon, Georgia: Smith & Helwys Publishing, 2017), 26-28.

deepest concepts of the Christian faith, concepts that are often misconstrued by both Christians and non-Christians.² Indeed, this problem is so pervasive that one wonders if there is not some great power who is trying to deceive us about the nature of Christianity. This being so, let us examine the Lord's Prayer to discover how we ought to think of our Christian faith, and our life in this world.

“Our Father”

Our Lord Jesus Christ instructs us to begin by proclaiming our relationship to God the Father. Our Father, not “my” Father, but “Our” Father. Thus, from the outset we learn that this prayer ought to be offered with other Christians. Why? Because it is more powerful when so offered (“That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered to together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:19-20). Does this mean that it should not be prayed while alone? No, but two or more is better and another of the many reasons that Christianity is not a solitary religion. Going to church, having Christian friends, being part of a body of believers, is the Christian way.

And who is this “Father” that we are to pray to? Jesus used the term *abba* to describe the Father in heaven. It is a rare word in the New Testament, even unconventional. It implies an intimate loving relationship with the one so addressed. In explaining this word, Nijay Gupta wrote, “one must remember that Jesus was not directing prayer to a cosmic despot, a bullying parent, a stern paternal judge...”³ Quite the opposite is true. In the *Opus Imperfectum* of the fifth century – an ancient commentary on Matthew's gospel – we read, “He wishes Himself to be called Father rather than Lord so that He may give us great confidence in seeking Him and great hope in beseeching Him.”⁴

²Herman Waetjen, *Praying the Lord's Prayer* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity press International, 1999), 119.

³Gupta, *The Lord's Prayer*, 44.

⁴As quoted in Gupta, *The Lord's Prayer*, 46.

So one prays to the “Father,” not Christ, but God the Father, the first person of the Holy Trinity. Jesus Christ himself, the second person of the Trinity, has instructed you to pray to His Father, in the name of His beloved Son: Jesus Christ. When Jesus prayed, he prayed to his Father, and so He told us to do the same. Moreover, the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, will help you pray. Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans (8:26), “...for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.” Thus, you need not feel inadequate. Just pray. Imagine this: the God of the universe wants to hear from you. His only Son has told you how to pray, and declares, use my name, I am your reference, my Father will know you. And the Holy Spirit will help your words, and even pray with you and for you, if you just pray. Friends, you will never get better help than this.

“Who art in heaven”

Where is our Father? He is in Heaven, an unearthly place. It is not in the sky or in the clouds; and is not even in the universe for it existed before the creation of all matter, before time itself. Do not confuse the Heaven that is the dwelling place of the Lord with the “heavens” that were created in Genesis 1:1. Clearly, God was not in the “heavens” when He created them. The author of I Kings wrote, “Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain thee [God]” (8:27). Karl Barth, in explaining what happens when men give up the God of Heaven for the god of this world, said, “And so the ‘No-God’ is set up, idols are erected [in the images of earthly things], and God, *who dwells beyond all this and that* [all that is made, italics mine], is ‘given up.’”⁵ So do not think of Heaven as it is depicted in childish cartoons as somewhere in the clouds. Your mind cannot conceive of God’s Heaven. If you could properly understand the Biblical heaven you would have a solid reason for rejecting Christianity. It

⁵Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960, 50-51).

would be too simple. The God of the Universe, that God who is omnipotent (all powerful) and omniscient (all knowing), does not dwell in a place your finite mind can grasp. I do know this: human beings who reject Christianity because heaven must be boring have not given much thought to the question.

“Hallowed be Thy Name”

Hallowed, for modern readers, is better translated, Holy. One must remember this is prayer. Those who pray the Lord’s Prayer are praying that men will praise the name of the Most-High God, that human beings will reverence His name. They are praying that God’s name will not be used lightly, disrespectfully, or in vain; that is, men will not swear by the name of God. This, of course, is completely in keeping with the third commandment, “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain” (Exodus 20:7). Have you ever wondered why human beings swear by the name of the Lord? I have. Why do they do it? If they are believers, they know it is wrong; if they are non-believers, they don’t believe it has any power, so why swear? And yet, the name of God and of His Son are constantly used as swear words. It is as if some dark power moves men to break the commandment. Today, the taking of the name of God lightly, in jest, in exclamation, in other words in vain, is so common that it has its own abbreviation in emails and texts. Yes, OMG. Some people apparently cannot even speak without uttering this profanity. Father, forgive them, for they probably do not even know what they do. And that is a sad commentary on our culture. And so, Hallowed, or Holy, be thy name is a prayer that is most earnestly needed.

“Thy Kingdom Come”

Thy Kingdom Come is the next phrase of the prayer. Indeed, this plea, “Thy Kingdom Come,”

dominates the whole prayer.⁶ Thus, tragically, if there is a more misunderstood aspect of Christian theology, I do not know what it is. For here Christians are taught to pray that God's Kingdom will come to earth in the same way that it is in Heaven. Why? So that God's will shall be done. Is it not obvious that the Kingdom of God has not yet arrived on Earth as it has in Heaven? Is it not obvious that God's will is not obeyed on Earth as it is in Heaven? Heaven is holy as God is holy. There is no sin there. That the Earth does fit not that description is beyond dispute.

There are deep problems, then, concerning "Thy Kingdom Come." Among them, some Christians believe Christ's kingdom arrived when he came to Earth over 2,000 years ago, others when the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost; while still others believe that the world will gradually become more Christian, and then, someday in the future, Christ will return to this Christian world as King. This latter view is called post-millennialism.⁷

The final point of view is that Christ will not return to Earth until the tribulation – a time of great trial, suffering, and death, has ended, and then the millennial kingdom of Jesus Christ will begin with the Lord himself on the throne. The Kingdom of God, then, is a time when Jesus reigns; His will is done on earth as it is in heaven.⁸ Many prophecies of Scripture have a dual fulfillment and it seems this is one of them. The Kingdom of the Lord, a spiritual kingdom, commenced with Jesus' first coming: His earthly ministry.⁹ In regard to this kingdom, Jesus said, "the kingdom of Heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:2; 4:17, Matthew 10:7). But we must reconcile this assertion with Jesus' instruction that His disciples pray that His kingdom should come. That would be silly if the kingdom had already commenced, that Jesus reigned in this world. That was precisely the temptation, to reign in this world, that Jesus rejected in His wilderness sojourn. Thus, there is a two-stage fulfillment of the Kingdom of Heaven.¹⁰ For our purposes, it is only necessary that we understand that Christ's kingdom has not come

⁶Henri van den Bussche, *Understanding the Lord's Prayer* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 77.

⁷Gupta, *The Lord's Prayer*, 76.

⁸Bussche, *Understanding the Lord's Prayer*, 78.

⁹Bussche, *Understanding the Lord's Prayer*, 85,86.

¹⁰Gupta, *The Lord's Prayer*, 76.

in its entirety, the Earth is not a holy place. The Lord does not reign here as he does in heaven – yet.¹¹ Jesus himself told us that His kingdom was “not of this world.” (John 18:36). When the Father’s kingdom, Jesus’ kingdom, comes, that event marks the end of this world and the beginning of the new world with the New Jerusalem as its capital (Revelation 3:12; 21:2; 21:10).¹²

Indeed, this world is not directly governed by God at all. Satan is the God of this world and that fact accounts for the chaos, sin, and judgement that is the condition of this planet.¹³ Paul tells us as clearly as language allows that Satan is in charge of this world in 2 Corinthians 4:4, “In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel ...” In Psalm 115:3 we read that “God is in the Heavens” and in verse 16, “the heavens are the Lord’s heavens, but the earth he has given to the sons of men.” And what have the sons of men done with the Earth? Paul tells us in Ephesians 2:1-2, “And you He (Jesus) made alive, when you were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, *following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, [Satan] the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience* [non-believers, italics mine].” If we are unsure of these things, we may read in Matthew 12:26 that Satan has a kingdom, and in Matthew 4:8,9 he offers that earthly kingdom to Jesus in return for Jesus’s worship. This Jesus flatly refuses to do. But He does not say that the offer was not in Satan’s power; for it surely was. This is why it was a temptation. Then Jesus responded, “Begone, Satan... You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only shall you serve” (Matthew 4: 10).

Like the dual fulfillment of prophecy mentioned above, the “Kingdom Come” aspect of the Lord’s prayer also has a dual purpose. In praying for the Lord’s kingdom to come physically to earth in his second coming, we cannot truly desire this unless we also earnestly hope to be so conformed in our lives to that kingdom. In other words, to be like Jesus today. Thus we are praying the Lord’s Kingdom

¹¹Bussche, *Understanding the Lord’s Prayer*, 79, 81, 84,85,89.

¹²Bussche, *Understanding the Lord’s Prayer*, 85.

¹³Bussche, *Understanding the Lord’s Prayer*, 84.

come to me today, and that we eagerly await the coming of Christ's kingdom in its completeness. N. T. Wright captures this thought beautifully:

We are praying, as Jesus was praying and acting, for the redemption of the world; for the radical defeat and uprooting of evil; and for heaven and earth to be married at last, for God to be all in all. And if we pray this way, we must of course be prepared to live this way.¹⁴

“Thy will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven”

The problem as to whose will is done on Earth is one of the most important Christian theological problems. The popular view, among both Christians and non-Christians, is that no matter what happens in life, it is God's will. Given that there is evil in the world, and almost unimaginable daily tragedies, many people reject an all-powerful, all knowing, all good, God. They cannot rationalize the state of the world with a good God. This was C.S. Lewis's view before he became a Christian.¹⁵

As for Christians who do believe that God causes all things, and I commend you for your faith, they maintain that the evil that happens to them will work to their benefit at some point. They place great reliance on Romans 8:28, “For we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to His purpose.” And these brothers in sisters in Christ are correct to believe that no matter what happens to them, God is with them, and God will cause tragedy to “work together for good.” But they are not correct in supposing that all evil, everything that happens to them, necessarily came from God. We are not God's puppets, dangling over eternity as if controlled by the great puppeteer. We have moral freedom, the moral responsibility, to make choices in this life. And the choices are real. And all of us, for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God (Romans

¹⁴N.T. Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer* (Grand Rapids, Mi.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 19.

¹⁵C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Westwood, New Jersey, Barbour and Co., n.d.), 33.

3:23), have made choices against God's will. He wanted us to choose differently. And, other people whom we may encounter also have the freedom to behave against God's will and, in so doing, may harm us. As to our freedom of choice, Consider Jesus' conversation with the rich young ruler. This man wanted to know how he may obtain eternal life. Jesus told him to obey the commandments, sell his possessions, and come follow him. Sadly, for both parties, the young ruler refused, disobeyed God's will, and walked away (Matthew 18: 18-24).¹⁶ Again, Jesus's will was that the young man follow Him, but the former refused. The truth is that there is horrible evil in the world that is wholly averse to God's will. All human history demands that we recognize this unassailable fact.¹⁷ John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, one of the great pieces of literature in the English language, captures our human condition in stunning poetry:

O shame to men! Devil to Devil damned
Firm concord holds [devils are loyal to devils], Men only disagree
Of creatures rational, though under hope
Of Heavenly grace, and God proclaiming peace
[despite God's grace, men are in conflict with men, against God's will],
Yet live in hatred, enmity and strife
Among themselves, and levy [wage] cruel wars,
Wasting the earth, each other to destroy:
As if (which might induce us to accord)
Man had not Hellish foes anow besides,
That day and night for his destruction wait [men hate men, when, they might better have
recognized the true enemy from hell, who plots their destruction].¹⁸

¹⁶That God does indeed desire that all men be saved see: I Timothy 2:4.

¹⁷Bussche, *Understanding the Lord's Prayer*, 98.

¹⁸John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (Franklin Center, Pennsylvania: The Franklin Library, 1979), 46.

Thus, the true meaning of “thy will be done” is that God’s will be done on Earth, for it is not as things now stand, as it is in Heaven. This then is the great prayer of the Christian faith; that God’s entire will shall be done on earth.¹⁹ Everything else is secondary. So, to pray this prayer means that the petitioner is seeking the second coming of Jesus Christ, the fulfillment of God’s Kingdom.²⁰ Of course, one may pray that God’s will be done in some aspect of life more immediate and personal. In such a situation, the Christian is battling for the Lord against the prince of the air, the god of this world, who would thwart the purpose God, if he could, in our lives. C.S. Lewis was absolutely correct when he described life on earth as living in a world in which two great powers were at war.²¹ We Christians know the outcome, decided on the cross, but the end of the conflict has not yet arrived. H. Van Den Bussche has correctly described this reality:

The will of God, which is a design for salvation, was realized by the life, and principally at the end of the life, of Jesus. But this will for salvation [by God] has not yet finished its work; it has not yet attained its plenitude (fullness). Here again, Christians find themselves between an “already” and “not yet,” between the act of God which gives grace, and that which will give glory (Jesus second coming).²²

And again, in his epic poem, Milton wrote of this cosmic battle between Satan and the all-powerful God of Heaven. In this passage, Satan has been cast from heaven with his demons. And now they consider their course of action:

[let us: Satan and his demons] Consult how we may henceforth most offend
Our Enemy [God], our own loss repair,
How overcome this dire Calamity [being cast from heaven],

¹⁹Bussche, *Understanding the Lord’s Prayer*, 100-102.

²⁰Bussche, *Understanding the Lord’s Prayer*, 103, 104.

²¹Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 39.

²²Bussche, *Understanding the Lord’s Prayer*, 102.

What reinforcement we may gain from Hope,
If not what resolution from Despair.²³

One final problem Christians face with this aspect of the Lord's prayer: giving up our earthly life, our hopes our dreams, to prefer that God's will be done in the form of the second coming of Christ. The return of Jesus, as we have seen, means the end of time, of life, as we know it. Most Christians, if they are honest, are reluctant on this point. It takes some significant prayer and spiritual maturity to truly pray, "Thy will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven." Jesus, of course, knows this which is why he told us:

And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands,
for my name's sake, will receive a hundred-fold [hundred times] and inherit eternal life.²⁴

In addition, and as noted above, the finite human mind cannot conceive of the joys of heaven. Heaven is the dwelling place of the most-high God, omniscience and omnipotence personified. How could such limited creatures as ourselves grasp His heaven? This explains why the Bible's description of Heaven and the afterlife are vague. We are given enough information for our earthly purpose; faith, then, must cover the remaining questions. Maranatha Lord Jesus.

Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread

The focus of the Lord's Prayer now shifts from God's majesty and purpose to our needs. This is as it should be; first we recognize the maker and master of the universe; we pray that His purpose be done in a world in which He has given us freedom and responsibility. And having done that, we recognize our

²³Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 11, 12.

²⁴Matthew 19: 29.

dependence upon Him for both our great needs – our salvation, but also our mundane or daily needs: bread. The temptation here is to spiritualize “bread” away from its basic and obvious meaning: that bread which we eat. What Jesus seems to desire here is not primarily to remind us that He is the bread of life, but that we are dependent upon God for that which physically sustains us. Not only are we dependent upon God for our sustenance, we are to pray *daily* for this food. This design is linked to the Israelite’s sojourn in the wilderness when they were taught to rely upon God for their bread, their manna, on a daily basis (Exodus chapter 16).²⁵ Thus Jesus joined together the human experience of the Old Testament with His new covenant; in both, human beings were and are daily dependent upon God for our physical well-being. And this dependence is not restricted to bread as food, though we begin there. Bread is properly understood as those aspects of life that are necessary. Martin Luther famously wrote in his *Small Catechism*:

What does this [Daily Bread] mean? ... everything that has to do with the support and needs of the body, such as food, drink, clothing, shoes, house, home, land, animals, money, goods, a devout husband or wife, devout children, devout workers, devout and faithful rulers, good government, good weather, peace, health, self-control, good reputation, good friends, faithful neighbors, and the like.²⁶

Indeed, Jesus told us, just before he gave us His great prayer, that our heavenly Father already knows what we need, so don’t list these needs using many words as the “Gentiles do” (Matthew 6:8), but, pray simply for Daily Bread. On the other hand, the prayer asks for needs, not luxuries. Craig Blomberg’s phrasing is very helpful, “the prayer makes request for our needs, not our greeds.”²⁷

²⁵Gupta, *The Lord’s Prayer*, 92, 93.

²⁶Martin Luther, *Luther’s Small Catechism* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986), 21.

²⁷Craig Blomberg, as quoted in Gupta, *The Lord’s Prayer*, 98.

Nor should we pass over the word “daily” too quickly. There is a significant controversy amongst scholars as to the meaning of “daily.” Does it mean today or the day after? For our purposes, it does not matter: the meaning is immediate need, whether we gather bread for today, or whether we gather bread today for consuming tomorrow is not a significant difference. The point is we are daily dependent upon God for our bread, our lives.²⁸ Augustine, the fourth century bishop of Hippo, wrote, “Daily we live, and daily rise, and are daily fed, and daily hunger. May He then give us daily bread.”²⁹ If this dependence is properly understood, it is life transforming. Unfortunately, our modern lives make grasping this aspect of the Lord’s prayer difficult. For most of us, the daily problem is not too little bread, but far too much. But throughout most of human history, and in much of the world today, hunger, the threat of famine, was and is all too real. For such Christian people, the prayer may be uttered with some desperation. But for someone like myself who has never spent a day in hunger that was not self-imposed, I must dwell on these words and recognize that the ease with which I feed myself is God’s answer to untold millions of prayers for daily bread for His people; and part of my responsibility is to so pray for, and help, those who still suffer. May the kingdom come.

And Forgive Us Our Debts As We Forgive Our Debtors

The fact that I have not divided this line of the Lord’s prayer in two is instructive as to its meaning: it cannot be divided. Much as many people would love to separate the first half from the second, the word “as” will not allow it. If we are to have God’s forgiveness, we must forgive those who have sinned against us.³⁰ I am afraid there is no getting around this condition of our own forgiveness. Jesus did not intend to provide an escape hatch from the commandment of love, of mercy. Forgiveness and mercy are

²⁸Gupta, *The Lord’s Prayer*, 95-98. Pritchard, *And When You Pray*, 123-125.

²⁹Augustine as quoted in Gupta, *The Lord’s Prayer*, 98.

³⁰Gupta, *The Lord’s Prayer*, 121. Waetjen, *Praying the Lord’s Prayer*, 85-87. Bussche, *Understanding the Lord’s Prayer*, 126. Pritchard, *And When You Pray*, 146.

fundamental concepts of Christianity.³¹ After he had finished teaching His prayer to the disciples, this is the only aspect of the prayer he went on to explain, to emphasize, so there could be no confusion.³² He said, “For if you forgive men their trespasses [sins], your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matthew 6:14-15). Jesus also made this point on other occasions. In Matthew 18 Jesus tells Peter that forgiveness must be given no matter how many times the offense is made; then Jesus told the parable of the king and his servant. The king was willing to forgive a debt the servant owed, but the servant would not forgive a much smaller debt owed to him by a fellow servant. When the king learned of this hardness of heart, he revoked his forgiveness and cast the wicked servant into prison. Jesus said the “the kingdom of heaven may be compared...” to such a kingdom (Matthew 18: 21-35).

The key word in this teaching is “as,” the Greek word *hos*. This word, “signifies at once a condition and a comparison. God forgives us ‘on condition that’ and ‘in the measure in which’ we forgive.”³³ This willingness to forgive, however, is not entirely self-generated; it is a product of God’s forgiveness in our life. God working with us will move us to show the mercy to others he has shown to us.³⁴ Herman Waetjen is very helpful in understanding this important point:

[The prayer] ...implies that those whom God has generated (justified) and who therefore belong to God’s household will act like their divine parent and be true to their identity as God’s sons and daughters. Jesus exhorted his disciples to incarnate such a disposition: ‘Be perfect, therefore as your heavenly Father is perfect (Matthew 5:48).’ And ‘Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate’” (Luke 6:36).³⁵

So we are to forgive. What does forgiveness include; upon what conditions must it be given?

Matthew’s version of the prayer uses the word debt rather than sin. This is to illustrate his point, not to

³¹Gupta, *The Lord’s Prayer*, 113.

³²Pritchard, *And When You Pray*, 150.

³³Bussche, *Understanding the Lord’s Prayer*, 125.

³⁴Bussche, *Understanding the Lord’s Prayer*, 126.

³⁵Waetjen, *Praying the Lord’s Prayer*, 84.

limit forgiveness to financial debt. Luke uses the word sin, and this is its meaning. We are to forgive sins that have been committed against us as a lender forgives a debt that cannot be paid.³⁶ What, then, is a sin?

A sin is any behavior that falls short of God's holiness: pride, selfishness, unkindness, lying, lust, adultery, arrogance, cruelty, hatred, murder, in short, the full range of the behavior one sees in our various forms of entertainment, and often experience in our daily lives. Most of us, in thought or deed, will commit one or more of these sins daily. Paul tells us in Romans 3:23, "...since all (human beings) have sinned and fall short of the glory (holiness) of God." Only the very faithful, the very blessed, may ascend to a place in this life in which no further sins are committed. And many versions of the Christian faith assert that this holiness is not possible. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus is not concerned with the holy ones, but for the rest of us. We are to forgive sins committed against us if we are to be forgiven. A brief survey of our popular culture suggests how un-Christian we are. From daytime talk shows to big budget movies, revenge, sex outside of marriage, lying and cheating in every aspect of life, are our daily diet of entertainment, and the behavior we emulate. The gossip magazines, the pages of our newspapers, and local evening news on TV are full of our misbehavior; and social media sites reflect our mob mentality and cruelty almost without restraint. These are the things we are to forgive, and to quit doing ourselves.

What is forgiveness? When we forgive, we are most like Christ. But few among us can completely forgive an offense against us. There always seems to be some lasting resentment, some vestige of hurt. Prayer, then, is required that we might forgive, might overcome our human emotions. And Jesus in His wisdom has us pray daily "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." This aspect of the Lord's prayer, then, is for strength to forgive as much as it is a prayer to be forgiven. We are praying that the Lord will help us restore a broken relationship with the person who has sinned

³⁶Bussche, *Understanding the Lord's Prayer*, 119.

against us.³⁷ And note this is an apt prayer whether the person has asked for forgiveness or not. The prayer speaks to my own heart as the forgiver, and to the heart of the offender who has not yet apologized. So our attitude toward someone who has given offense must not be “I will not pray for, or forgive, them until they apologize,” but rather, “Father lead my heart to forgive even before it is asked of me.” For in this way we are like the Father who wants to forgive us, and we are like the Son who cried on the cross “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). Notice here, Jesus does not forgive those responsible for His crucifixion, He pleads their case to the Father. Nor have these crucifiers sought forgiveness, but Jesus’ attitude toward them is full of love and willingness to forgive. Therefore, it should not really matter in your own mind whether someone who has offended you has apologized or not, you should already be seeking a willingness to forgive when it is asked of you. Of course, it is required of all who sin to seek forgiveness; but our attitude toward the unrepentant is to be the same as the Father and the Son: God is not willing that any should perish. Perhaps a reminder of the parable of the Prodigal Son is helpful. What was the father’s response when his wayward, profligate, and utterly sinful son returned home? Luke tells us the old man saw his son while he was “yet at a distance” and “had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him” (Luke 15: 20). God is like the father in the story, He wants to forgive us; and if we show the slightest repentance, He will “run” to us and embrace us like a father who was recovered a lost son.³⁸ That should be our attitude toward those who sin against us.

And Lead Us Not Into Temptation

Here is another of the key concepts of the Christian faith found in the Lord’s Prayer: temptation. What is temptation, who tempts us, and why? The early church was very concerned about these questions,

³⁷Bussche, *Understanding the Lord’s Prayer*, 123.

³⁸Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer*, 35-37.

and rightfully so.³⁹ The first thing to understand is the difference between testing and temptation. The Greek word *peirasmos* may be translated either way. Context determines the translation. Fortunately, we have James on the question. James wrote, “Count it all joy my brethren when you meet various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness” (James 1:2). Just a few verses later, James wrote, “Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am tempted by God,’ for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one” (James: 1:13). James uses the same Greek word in these two passages. In verse 2 it is translated test or trial; in verse 13 it is translated tempted. And it must be so rendered or James makes no sense. He cannot say in verse 2 that God tempts us, and then say in verse 13 that He does not. So *peirasmos* is translated differently.⁴⁰ How does this help? Very much so.

There is no question that God tests us, gives Satan the power to tempt us.⁴¹ This is clear in the Old Testament, the New Testament, and of course, the lives of human beings in all times and places. Paul informs us that temptations are “common to men” (I Corinthians 10:13). But God does not allow that testing in the hope that we will fail, far from it. God allows the testing knowing that we can be victorious if we only so choose.⁴² Paul reminds us that “God is faithful, and He will not let you be tempted beyond your strength...” (I Corinthians 10:13). It is Satan, in the tempting, who hopes we will fail. But if we persevere in faith, we are strengthened in that faith and serve as a positive example to others. Completing James 1:2 from above we read, “And let steadfastness (loyalty, faith, perseverance) have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” So testing occurs to strengthen our faith.

Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a free-will world that would not include testing/temptation. If there is no free will in the world, if all that exists exactly represents God’s will, then the Scriptures

³⁹Pritchard, *And When You Pray*, 170.

⁴⁰Pritchard, *And When You Pray*, 170-172. Gupta, *The Lord’s Prayer*, 137, 138.

⁴¹Gupta, *The Lord’s Prayer*, 145, 146.

⁴²Gupta, *The Lord’s Prayer*, 138, 143.

make no sense. The truth is that human beings have corrupted themselves and the earth against God's will; and He has decreed a certain time and method, during which and by which, human beings may be reclaimed for His kingdom. In the meantime, there is a spiritual battle taking place on earth with men and women fully in the middle of it. Many, perhaps most, of our sins come not as a result of Satan's testing, at least not in the immediate sense, but from our own human selfish desires.⁴³ James wrote, "...but each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire" (James: 1:14). We use the term free -will to mean that human beings have a choice to make, whose side to join. But free-will does not mean that the choice takes place in a vacuum. Satan has his will and wiles to entice us to his side, and God's own Spirit, and manifest Glory, persuade us of His existence and love for us. But we also have power, a role to play in our own destiny. We have a choice to make. And here in the Lord's Prayer our savior has told us to pray to the Father for the strength to make the right decision, to resist temptation, join the battle, and emerge victorious.⁴⁴

But Deliver Us From Evil

The proper translation of this line of the prayer should be "deliver us from the evil *one*." In other words, deliver us from Satan.⁴⁵ We should not understand this aspect of the Lord's prayer as primarily seeking deliverance from temptations originating in our minds, or as a circumstance of the world. Rather, the Lord Jesus directs us to be aware of the power of the evil one, the god of this world, and pray specifically to be delivered from his schemes and temptations. Karl Barth wrote powerfully of this truth:

Lead us, for we are thy children, saved through Jesus Christ, Spare us not from struggle (which

⁴³Luther, *Luther's Small Catechism*, 21.

⁴⁴Karl Barth, *Prayer* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 62.

⁴⁵Pritchard, *And When You Pray*, 189, 190. Bussche, *Understanding the Lord's Prayer*, 139. Waetjen, *Praying the Lord's Prayer*, 123.

we must accept) [the daily struggle with testing, with life], not from sufferings (which we must endure) [again, the daily sufferings that are part of life on this side of the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God], but spare us from the encounter with this enemy [Satan], who is stronger than all our strength, more clever than our intelligence (including the intelligence we put into our theology), more dangerously sentimental – for the Devil is also sentimental – than we ourselves are capable of being. He is more pious [appears to be more faithful] than all our Christian piety both ancient and modern, or theological. Shield us from all possibility of evil from which we know not how to preserve ourselves since it would utterly and irrevocably degrade us to the level of brutes.⁴⁶

Understanding the Lord's Prayer in this way, as primarily concerned with overcoming the awesome power of Satan, helps us to reconcile this petition, "deliver us from evil," with James 1:2, "Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials." The problem is straightforward: Jesus seems to tell us to pray to avoid evil or testing; James, along with other Scriptures, suggests we should count such moments as joy as we are being refined, improved, in the moment of trial. This is a clear contradiction. But if we remember that the Lord Jesus' larger concern in the prayer he taught is the Kingdom of Heaven, and the proper translation of the verse in question is the, *evil one*, then it becomes apparent that Jesus intends us to pray to thwart the schemes of the evil one as he threatens the kingdom of heaven and those who would inhabit it. Pray that we are spared that trial. N.T. Wright agrees with Barth that this line of the prayer has such a large-scale focus:

First it means let us escape the great tribulation, the great testing, that is coming on all the world [the coming of God's Kingdom] [And]...Enable us to pass through the testing of our faith.⁴⁷

In short, it is a mistake to underestimate Satan; and Jesus corrects that mistake in His prayer. But it is

⁴⁶Barth, *Prayer*, 61, 62.

⁴⁷Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer*, 54, 55.

also a mistake to go too far in the other direction, obsessing over Satan. As is often the case, in theology, as in life, there is a balance between extremes.

Establishing the proper balance of our thoughts, prayers, and theology, then, is a major part of the Lord's Prayer. We must not relegate Satan to the ash heap of history before that event occurs. But we must keep the Lord and His victory over Satan, already accomplished though not fulfilled, foremost in our minds. How, then, did Jesus respond to the evil one? He recognized the reality and power of Satan; and He confronted Satan with the greater reality and power of the kingdom of God.⁴⁸ He took Satan seriously. He prayed and fasted that He might overcome the schemes of the Evil One in the moment of trial (Luke 4:1-13). Cyprian (3rd century Bishop of Carthage) also reminds us to focus on Christ, without forgetting the power of Satan, "Thus all our fear and devotion and our heedfulness [attention] should be directed toward God so that when we are in temptation He allows no power [beyond the power He granted to test] to the evil one."⁴⁹ And N.T. Wright agrees with Cyprian, "Jesus intends his followers to recognize not only the reality of evil but the reality of his victory over it...inhale the victory of the cross, and thereby to hold the line for another moment, another hour, another day, against the forces of destruction within ourselves and the world."⁵⁰

Life is testing, the kingdom of Christ comes through pain and suffering. Evil is in the world and part of the human condition (Romans 3:23) Being a Christian means "signing on for a struggle and a battle," not only with Satan, but also ourselves.⁵¹ The life of Jesus, as always, is our great example.⁵² And sometimes we are not spared the testing, but Second Thessalonians 3:3 tells us we will be strengthened when we face trials: "But the Lord is faithful; He will strengthen you and guard you from evil." And so we pray as Jesus directed us, "deliver us from evil," allow us to pass safely through the

⁴⁸Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer*, 52.

⁴⁹Cyprian, as quoted in Gupta, *The Lord's Prayer*, 142.

⁵⁰Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer*, 52, 53.

⁵¹Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer*, 48, 54. Gupta, *The Lord's Prayer*, 145-147.

⁵²Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer*, 49.

great tribulation, to pass through a challenge to our Christian faith.⁵³ Do not misread this promise, and the answering of this prayer. It does not mean that we will live through such an extreme challenge; it means we will remain faithful even unto death. The testing may cost us our lives.⁵⁴ We must be serious students of history and theology. For 2,000 years, scores of thousands of Christians have died for their faith. They were faithful, they prayed for deliverance, and the Lord's answer was "my grace is sufficient for you; for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9). In the Third century, an epidemic devastated the Roman world. As many as five thousand people per day died in the city of Rome alone. Most of the pagan physicians, priests, and politicians fled the afflicted, fled the dreaded distemper. But most Christians did not flee; they ministered to the sick, exposed themselves to the disease, and thus many of these faithful nurses died. They died martyrs for their faith as surely as if Caesar had used them to light the night. But their sacrifice was not in vain. The recovery rate of those so ministered to was substantially better than it was among the uncared for. And the love of the Christians, their fidelity to Christ and to their fellow man, did not go unnoticed. Church historian Rodney Stark credits such faithful behavior with advancing the Christian faith in the Roman world. It was clear to many Romans who had not previously converted that there was power and truth in the gospel of Jesus Christ.⁵⁵

As a Christian, do not look for ease, for comfort, but pray to discover your way of bearing the burden of Christ. We are privileged, then, to take part in the great changing of the world. Imagine, the God of all that is has allowed creatures such as you and I to have a role in the coming of the Heavenly Kingdom. Albert Schweitzer directs us to observe the hand of God, "Jesus was called to throw himself on the wheel of world history, so that even though it crushed Him, it might start to turn in the opposite direction."⁵⁶

⁵³Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer*, 55.

⁵⁴Watjean, *Praying the Lord's Prayer*, 104, 105.

⁵⁵Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 76-83.

⁵⁶Wright paraphrases Schweitzer in *The Lord and His Prayer*, 51.

For Thine is the Kingdom and Power and the Glory Forever, Amen

Faithful Biblical scholars disagree as to the authenticity of the last phrases of the Lord's Prayer. The earliest manuscripts of both Matthew and Luke do not include, "For the Thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever, Amen."⁵⁷ Consequently, two of the modern scholars I have referenced in this study do not comment directly on this aspect of the prayer (Gupta and van den Bussche). The other three (Wright, Pritchard, and Waetjen) are aware of the problem but believe the evidence suggests that the doxology – the last request in the prayer, should be included. Briefly, the doxology (Greek, literally: *glory saying*, often used to end a psalm or hymn or prayer) is found in first century church liturgy. And when we consider normal Jewish prayer practice, the ending of the Lord's prayer without such a doxology is odd.⁵⁸ Indeed, this ending evokes King David's prayer in I Chronicles 29:11, "Thine, O Lord is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty; for all that is in the heavens and the earth is thine; thine is the kingdom O Lord..."⁵⁹ It is not difficult to imagine Jesus invoking his ancestor King David in the conclusion of the prayer. What could be more appropriate?

Why did Luke and Matthew record different versions, and why did the early church add the doxology to Matthew? Jesus probably prayed His prayer in public on several occasions. And not intending to imply that the words themselves were somehow powerful, he varied the prayer, just as we do our prayers, from time to time. This would explain why there are different versions of the prayer, and why all versions are correct.⁶⁰ It may help to be reminded that the Bible as we know it evolved over centuries. The church did not recognize today's accepted canonical books until the fifth century.

Then too, the doxology provides a symmetrical ending to the Lord's Prayer. It returns us,

⁵⁷Waetjen, *Praying the Lord's Prayer*, 106.

⁵⁸Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer*, 62.

⁵⁹Pritchard, *And When You Pray*, 214.

⁶⁰Pritchard, *And When You Pray*, 214.

reminds us, of our purpose in the beginning of the prayer: to praise God, “Hallowed be Thy Name,” “For Thine is the Kingdom and Power and the Glory.”⁶¹ The doxology also provides a summary of the meaning of the Lord’s Prayer.⁶²

First, it insists the Lord’s Prayer is a “prayer of mission and commission” we commit ourselves to God’s Kingdom, not the kingdom of this world, and we go on a mission to see it established. In short, we seek to “subvert the kingdoms of this world with the kingdom of God.” There can be no other way. The Kingdom of God, and the kingdoms of this world, are in conflict.⁶³ There will be one winner, and one loser. In the words of Joshua, “choose this day whom you will serve, . . . but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord” (Joshua 24:15). N.T. Wright likens the kingdom of this world to candlelight in the darkness. The better human political structures offer a pale light. But the heavenly kingdom is light personified. It is a light that expels darkness in every corner, a light that bathes the believer in the Glory of God.⁶⁴

Second, in speaking the doxology we identify ourselves with the true and rightful king, Jesus Christ. In saying this prayer, we proclaim that we are part of God’s family; He is our Father, Jesus is our Brother. Third, we pray with confidence for we know that the omnipotent God of the universe is our God. We know that the coming of the kingdom began on the cross, and will one day be fulfilled in the clouds with Jesus Christ’s return to earth.⁶⁵ There is, then, no more fitting doxology, “For Thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory Forever, Amen [so be it].”

⁶¹Pritchard, *And When You Pray*, 215.

⁶²Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer*, 63-67.

⁶³Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer*, 66, 67.

⁶⁴Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer*, 62.

⁶⁵Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer*, 64, 65, 67.