

**LEARNING TO PRAY –
FROM THE LORD’S PRAYER
BY BRIAN JOHNSTON**

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LUKE 11:1-4

“**N**ow it came to pass, as He was praying in a certain place, when He ceased, that one of His disciples said to Him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples. So He said to them, “When you pray, say:

Our Father in heaven,

Hallowed be Your name.

Your kingdom come.

Your will be done

On earth as it is in heaven.

Give us day by day our daily bread.

And forgive us our sins,

For we also forgive everyone who is indebted to us.

And do not lead us into temptation,

But deliver us from the evil one.”

CHAPTER ONE: HALLOWED BE YOUR NAME

I would like this to be a practical look at the topic of prayer. And I doubt if Christian teaching can ever get any more practical than when dealing with the subject of prayer. It is something that is so basic, so fundamental to our daily lives as Christians, isn't it? What the hymn says is certainly true: 'Prayer is the Christian's vital breath, The Christian's native air.'

But that does not always mean that it comes naturally, as easy as breathing. The Bible itself recognizes there will be times when we do not know how to pray as we ought. And if you are like me from time to time you will be jolted into realising just how shallow your prayer life has become. There may well be times too when we feel spiritually dry and not at all in the right frame of mind for praying. Of course, these are the times when we need prayer all the more. If we persevere with the discipline of prayer even when it feels more like a duty than genuine devotion, and take our problem in this regard to God and ask His special help, we soon find the exercise once more becomes a delight. If you are longing for more purpose in prayer, more joy, more intimacy, more sense of His presence then stay with us as we invite the Lord Jesus, the supreme Teacher and supreme exponent of prayer, to share its secret with us.

That's exactly what He did in Luke chapter 11, you remember. It was then, after He had finished praying, that the disciples asked

Him to teach them to pray. Think of it for a moment. These same disciples had heard the Lord preach some wonderful sermons. The Sermon on the Mount has been called the most beautiful and profound discourse ever given on the art of living. But it is not recorded that the disciples ever asked the Lord to teach them how to preach, but they did ask Him to teach them to pray. We can only imagine how awe-inspiring it must have been to listen to the Lord speak to His Father in heaven. No wonder they said: 'Lord teach us to pray.'

In response to their request that day the Lord gave them what is usually referred to as "The Lord's Prayer." Perhaps, it would be more meaningful to label it 'The Disciple's Prayer' since it is intended as a model or guide for disciples. Of course, it was not the Lord's intention that just anyone should mindlessly repeat it whenever they wished to seek God's favour. But rather that its principles could be sensitively used to guide a true disciple in his or her prayer life. As we will see there are six major points or requests contained in this pattern prayer, and surely we would expect at any one time to major on perhaps only two or three of them as the Holy Spirit leads us.

Scarcely ever have so few words been so meaningful and helpful. In a typical English version the model prayer amounts to some 66 words. Only 66 words, but they encompass all the elements of a lifetime of rich prayer. I do not know whether your habit is to pray out loud or whether you pray silently during your personal prayers at home. The Bible records the Lord's words as being: 'When you pray say': Our Father in heaven' etc.

I allow that to be a reminder to me that it's often helpful to pray audibly even in private - to 'say' the prayer rather than to just 'think' it. I certainly find it is an aid to concentration to actually put it into words that are spoken. It serves as a discipline for me to guard against wandering thoughts or skating too glibly in thought over a range of different issues without any real depth or intensity associated with them. Surely neither of these things is consistent with a reverent approach to God in prayer, one which remembers who He is. And that is how we are taught to come before God at the very beginning of this example prayer. 'Our Father in heaven,' it begins, which all at once reminds us that we are on the earth and God is in heaven. What an awesome privilege that we can have, at any time, an audience with the King of Heaven! And to be able to call on Him as 'Father!'

Remember we said this is really the disciple's prayer. It is only for someone who has received the Lord Jesus into their heart as their personal Saviour. After knowing the experience of being born again, we can appropriately take these words upon our lips. You see, this is an approach to God that is based on relationship. Those early Jewish disciples of the Lord Jesus, to whom this model prayer was originally given, were not new to prayer, but never before would they have addressed God as their Father. And yet although this form of address captures the intimacy of a child's relationship with their parent, and the bold asking that can lead to, there can be no thought whatever of familiarity here. Instead it is the intimate reverence of the adoring child of God, coming in a spirit of awe and worship.

Notice the disciples originally asked the Lord Jesus to teach them to pray, not to teach them how to pray. Perhaps we can relate

to that too. Often our weakness in prayer may simply be in getting started - how to begin - how to get launched into prayer. The Lord certainly gives us some real prayer-starters here, doesn't He? Thoughts of His holy character, thoughts of His overall control over all things, thoughts of His plan and purpose for our lives. That ought to be enough to kindle our prayers! And lead on to us pouring out our hearts to Him.

Of the six points in this prayer the first three aspirations or affirmations are most definitely God-centred, dealing with God's Name, God's Kingdom and God's will. We could hardly be reminded more forcibly that true prayer is a concern for the glory of God. It is not first and foremost about me getting my needs met, but about giving God His rightful place. And when I give God His rightful place then I am put in my place. I humble myself and through prayer express my total dependence on God. You know, to hear some Christians debating you would think some had reservations about professing that God is sovereign. But any Christian who truly prays, according to this prayer the Lord Jesus taught us, is inevitably acknowledging the sovereignty of God. This prayer acknowledges that God is on the throne. And God is holy.

The first point made in the prayer is 'Hallowed be Your Name.' The Bible reminds us elsewhere that holy and reverent is God's name. In Bible times and language people's names were not given to them just because they sounded nice or were fashionable. Parents generally gave their children meaningful names, perhaps names the meaning of which expressed their longings for the child, names like 'Michael' which means 'godliness.' So this opening focus on God's name is really inseparable from God's

character. Moses one day asked God to show him His glory. The Exodus account tells us God did so by proclaiming His name, in other words He went on to describe Himself as being gracious, compassionate, full of truth and mercy, a forgiving God but above all just and righteous. In other words, God proclaimed His name by describing His holy character.

Just as the skin of Moses' face shone after him spending time in God's presence, so as we spend time in God's presence in prayer and focus on His holy character, then that will make an impression on us. It will have a sanctifying and purifying effect on our lives. Of course as we pray 'Hallowed be Your name', we cannot think that God can become any more holier than He already is, but we can aspire to have His name hallowed in us, in our lives. It is a challenging thought to ask ourselves if 'Holy is Your Name' could be written over everything we watch and say and do each day.

So this is indirectly seeking personal holiness as in the hymn "more holiness give me ..." It is an aspiration that seems well summed up in words I read long ago in a book called Calvary Road by Roy Hession: 'Lord break me, then cleanse me and fill me and keep me abiding in Thee; that fellowship may be unbroken, and Thy Name be hallowed in me.'

Prayer is the soul's sincere desire,

Uttered or unexpressed,
The motion of a hidden fire
That trembles in the breast.

Prayer is the burden of a sigh,

The falling of a tear,
The upward glancing of an eye
When none but God is near.

Prayer is the simplest form of speech

That infant lips can try;
Prayer, the sublimest strains that reach
The Majesty on high.

Prayer is the Christian's vital breath,

The Christian's native air,
His watchword at the gates of death;

BRIAN JOHNSTON

He enters heaven with prayer.

Prayer is the contrite sinner's voice,

Returning from his ways,

While angels in their songs rejoice

And cry, "Behold, he prays!"

Nor prayer is made on earth alone:

The Holy Spirit pleads,

And Jesus at the Father's throne

For sinners intercedes.

O You by whom we come to God,

The Life, the Truth, the Way!

The path of prayer Yourself has trod;

Lord, teach us how to pray.

(James Montgomery)

CHAPTER TWO: YOUR KINGDOM COME

I wonder if this is a time of trouble for you. Trouble in this life is inescapable, but fear can be avoided. The psalmist said: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, even though the earth be removed, And the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea; Though its waters roar and be troubled, Though the mountains shake with its swelling” (Psalm 46:1-3). We know from the Bible that the writers of this psalm had known a real amount of trouble and upheaval in their lives, so their boast was definitely not an empty one. Notice the source of their confidence: they knew God as their refuge. I hope you have found that refuge too.

And, if so, I wonder if you have ever tried praying through the psalms? Ambrose described the psalms as a ‘gymnasium for the soul’ where daily work-outs in prayer fitness bring new energy to our Quiet Times. A great many of them can be meaningful to us at many times in our lives, because they capture so many common experiences from the lives of real people. Good times and bad times, spiritual highs and lows are all illustrated in the psalms. They serve to demonstrate the reality of prayer. The Psalms teach us to pray honestly and to pray comprehensively. They also show how to pray in a God-centred way and how to be responsive to God.

Many psalms begin with the psalmist absorbed in his own troubles, expressing to God the full range of emotions. Perhaps this shows us that only when we open up to these emotions can they be ministered to. So often as we read through, we find mourning being turned to dancing, despair giving way to hope and doubt being replaced by confidence. How good it is to pray! But from beginning with his troubles: his own need, own desires, own concerns, the final destination of the psalm or prayer is usually sincere praise. That is what I mean about praying the psalm we mentioned.

In Psalm 46, notice how the earlier psalmist takes time to stand in awe of God and concludes with a note of real confidence in God's ability to deliver them out of the worst imaginable troubles. He says: "Come, behold the works of the LORD, Who has made desolations in the earth. He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; He breaks the bow and cuts the spear in two; He burns the chariot in the fire."

You know, it is as though in this prayer the Spirit of God gave the psalmist, although unknown to him, an apt description of events at the end of the world. All the talk about the earth being removed and mountains being carried into the sea seems to suggest some of the end-time prophecies of Matthew or Revelation, and the future time of great trouble that will centre on the nation of Israel. Then verses 8 and 9 could be read as applying to the return of the Lord when he will bring peace to this warring earth. Read them again: "He makes wars to cease to the ends of the earth; He breaks the bow and cuts the spear in two; He burns the chariot in the fire."

Now why do we mention all this? It seems a far cry perhaps from the Disciple's Prayer of Luke chapter 11, the pattern prayer the Lord gave to His disciples, and which begins: "Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come ..." Ah yes, "Your kingdom come." That is the second request or affirmation contained in the prayer, and it concerns the coming Messianic kingdom of Christ. I wonder if you agreed with me when I said that Psalm 46 was a good example of a prayer that had this emphasis on Christ's future rule on earth? A focus on the coming rule of God even at a time when the psalmist was busy with troubles in his own life. But why should we be interested in such an emphasis? In days of random killings and when many cry for despair because of the futility of life as they see it, it is majestic and awesome to think of God as the One who is guiding history to its appointed climax.

History is headed somewhere; it is headed towards the return of Jesus Christ and the time when the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of the Lord and His Christ. That is the time when Christ's great kingdom will come to earth, a kingdom of peace and light. In 1 Chronicles 12:32 we read about the men of Issachar who had an understanding of the times. In a sense it would appear from the Lord's prayer that for effective prayer it helps to have an understanding of the times we are living in, so soon to the Lord's return.

When the disciples asked the risen Lord in Acts chapter 1 they were eager for news about the coming kingdom, the time when Christ's great kingdom will come to earth, the Lord responded to them then by saying that it was not for them to know times and seasons. And surely, even today, we should, not be anxious

about dates for the Lord's return for His Church; many have fallen into that error - no, we are not to be interested in dates but rather to be ready now for whenever the Lord Jesus returns for His own. An understanding of the master plan of the King of the Ages will certainly help to guide us in prayer. How striking that the Lord Jesus places such an emphasis on it as to mention it in second place in the model prayer He has given to us.

How real to us is this recognition that God's Kingdom is coming? A time when Christ will reign and rule on this earth for a thousand years, and that before that He will come to the air, 1 Thessalonians 4 tells us in order to call up His Church, all true born-again believers, whether dead or living. I know many believers think it will all happen at one time, Christ coming for His own, and His reigning on the earth, but I suggest this is where we can have an understanding of the times we are living in, in the spirit of the prayer framework the Lord's given to us. May I suggest to you that if, when reading our Bibles, we keep matters regarding Israel and the Church separate, we will be helped to see Christ's return as happening in two stages: first for the Church and then at least 7 earth years later He will come back to deliver the faithful of Israel from their enemies. All prophecy to date has been fulfilled literally, therefore I believe we can expect all remaining prophecies to be fulfilled the same way.

After Christ's sudden, 'any moment' return for His Church, God will begin to deal directly with the nation of Israel again. They are already a nation again, gathered back in their ancient land. How will the Middle East crisis be resolved? It will only finally be settled when, in a pre-signalled event, quite different to His appearing for His Church, Christ will come to judge and set up

His righteous rule at the time of Armageddon. Let me remind you again why we have said all this. It is because, we believe, the Lord is teaching us, through the prayer of Luke 11, something of the reverence and awe that should be ours when we approach the Sovereign King of the Ages in prayer. We are to recognize the sovereign superintendence of His Story to its climax in Christ. When we do that in prayer, as Isaiah did in chapter 6 of his book, then no matter what our predicament is and no matter how deep the crisis, we will be helped to realize that the ways of God are deeper still.

In a time of national crisis, Isaiah was helped to see the Lord on the throne. What a vision! There is no panic in heaven; no sense of crisis there. God has not vacated the throne. The whole of history is in his control, and so how much more are my personal circumstances! Like the sons of Korah who wrote Psalm 46, our hearts too need not faint with fear.

It is one thing to talk about God's future program, one thing to pray the words 'Your kingdom come,' but sincerity demands that He rule me already. It is a real challenge to live more nearly as we pray, and in this especially, that as we long in prayer for His kingdom to come, our lives should even now show evidence that He is already reigning in our hearts. And this not only as individuals. The Lord's words in the New Testament very clearly show that He saw the New Testament churches of God which emerged after Acts chapter 2 as being an expression of God's kingdom at that time. And we believe that in churches of God today, patterned after the New Testament there is still an expression of the kingdom of God, corresponding for the present to this great prayer aspiration the Lord sets before us.

Your kingdom come, O God,

Your reign, O Christ, begin;

Break with Your iron rod

The tyrannies of sin.

Where is Your rule of peace

And purity, and love?

When shall all hatred cease,

As in the realms above?

When comes the promised time

That war shall be no more,

Oppression, lust, and crime

Shall flee Your face before?

We pray You'll, Lord, arise,
And come in Your great might;

Revive our longing eyes,

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Which languish for Your sight.

(Lewis Hensley)

CHAPTER THREE: YOUR WILL BE DONE

In our study of the model prayer the Lord gave in Luke chapter 11 we have already considered the first 2 requests. Both concern God, and so does the one we will look at in this chapter. It is the one which comes third, containing the well-known words “Your will be done.” What a reminder to us that prayer is basically to be an expression of our concern for God’s glory. That is what motivated Moses as he pleaded with God for God not to destroy His own people even though their disobedience deserved such judgement. The line Moses took in prayer was that the Egyptians would get a distorted view of God if He did destroy them, for they would say that God had brought His people out of Egypt to kill them in the desert. They would think that God had not been able to bring them into the land of promise. Moses knew the people’s rebelliousness, but his first priority when he prayed was God’s honour and reputation in the eyes of the world.

And so, as we say, we first get 3 requests that are God-centred before moving on to 3 that concern our own typical needs. How often we get even this basic point wrong. We rush into God’s presence with our shopping list of demands, our wish-list we might say - how little appreciation that shows of our awareness of the greatness of God! These words we are considering: ‘Your will be done,’ seem to cause some confusion today. Some people appear to use them at the conclusion of a specific request almost as

though they were a kind of 'face-saver,' just in case the desired result does not materialize. Others wonder why we need to bother to pray at all if God's going to do what He wants anyway. His will is sovereign after all, isn't it?

What I believe these words really do teach us is this: that the bottom line of all our praying has got to be: 'Do what You want in my life, LORD.' As the words of the hymn, *Have Thine own way, Lord, Have Thine own way* teaches, that is the secret of prayer. The essence of prayer is not me bending His will to mine, but bowing my will to His. Real prayer takes place when we plead in the power of the Spirit for what God desires. That requires that we be in tune with God, of course. We understand prayer best, I believe, when we understand it to be a response to His initiative. He hears and acts when our prayer is according to His will. And His Spirit moves His children into the current of God's will as they spend time in prayer.

But some of you may well be wondering again about that time Moses interceded for God to spare His people, the time we were thinking about earlier, concerning the incident of the golden calf. At first God had said to Moses "let Me alone that ... I may consume them." But after Moses had finished pleading we read: "so the LORD relented from the harm which He said He would do to His people." You say, isn't that show God changing His mind as a result of His servant's prayer?' But when we study this word 'relent' in Bible Dictionaries, we find that helpful comments are made about it being a description of God, but in human terms.

Other Bible verses make it clear that God does not change His mind (e.g. 1 Samuel 15:29; Psalm 110:4) except in the sense that a change in our conduct brings about a change in God's judgement, which just goes to show His moral consistency. So God 'relents' or changes His dealings with people but according to His sovereign purposes. The same sort of issue is thrown up when we read of Jonah preaching 'forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!' (Jonah 3:4). But when "God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way' (v.10), so that they cried mightily to Him (v.8), we read that He 'relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it' (v.10).

Then there is the case of Hezekiah, king of Judah not long before the Babylonian invasion. God's message to him was very clear: 'set your house in order, or you shall die and not live' (Isaiah 38:1). But Hezekiah prayed, and God spoke again to him: "I have heard your prayer ... I will add to your days fifteen years" (v.5).

It is easy to see how many understand these examples to show that, if we pray, God may well change His mind about a given matter. But I think it is fair to ask where did the motivation for such prayers as Moses and the Ninevites come from? Was it not God by His Spirit moving them to pray in that way? Surely He led them to pray in accordance with His sovereign will, a will which embraces different possible courses of action following from our choices? That is certainly how it appeals to me: that even recognizing these examples we have been thinking about, prayer is still basically a matter of my will bowing to God's, not God's will being bent to mine. Through prayer, God reveals His

will to us so that we may pray in a way so as to participate with Him in His purposes. When we pray in the Holy Spirit, we are indebted to God's Spirit as the One who intercedes for us according to the will of God.

Perhaps you say prayers like that of Moses were very dramatic prayers, not the sort of prayer I am used to. Well, let us consider Hannah's prayer recorded in First Samuel chapter 1. Hannah was childless and her rival taunted her because of her childlessness. Once during their annual visit to the house of God at Shiloh, Hannah prayed in great anguish of soul, prayed for a child. This prayer for a child reminds us that we may, no, we must, pray about the ordinary things of life: about tensions in home life, about natural, human longings, about coping with hurtful behaviour. I recall author Roy Hession saying that someone being hurtful towards us cannot be God's will for them, but we could try considering it as being within God's will for us. He watches our reaction - Christian character is better gauged by our reactions than by our actions. Has some fellow Christian, perhaps, hurt you or offended you? Then choose to react in a biblical, Christ-like way. Take the situation to the Lord in prayer like Hannah.

We have said that prayer is essentially me bowing to His will; not me bending His will to mine. But what about infertile Hannah? Were children not in God's original plan for her? Did God change His mind, so to speak, because she prayed? That's an attractive proposition. It is very tempting to say 'yes,' but again I suspect it is not true. I find even more appealing here the explanation that the reality is still that of this dear woman bowing to God's will, not bending it. Like other biblical characters such as

Joseph and David, God was allowing distress to come into her life but all the while meaning it for her long-term good, yes even Peninah's insecure jibes, God was putting her tears in His bottle, to use these tears to fashion the course of history!

Out of her distress in prayer God was intending to bring a Samuel, and glorious days of deliverance for the people of God; you see, suffering is but a prelude to glory in His plan. So we leave with a backward glimpse at this woman, a woman driven by God to desperation that out of the darkness of her soul might spring her divinely directed longings, deepening her devotion while all the time advancing God's master plan of bringing deliverance to the nation of Israel.

We have commented earlier in this book on the value of spoken prayer, even when we are praying in private during our personal prayers. But we find Hannah's prayer for a child in First Samuel chapter one was unexpressed – it was a prayer that was not uttered out loud. The text says: "Hannah spoke in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard" (v.13). Perhaps Hannah was so choked with emotion she could not speak. No doubt you have experienced times like that. I have. When I learned my father had only a few hours to live, he was dying of cancer, and I was boarding an aeroplane in an effort to get to his bedside. I can remember scarcely being able to gather my thoughts properly, never mind put it into spoken form. Yet my prayer was answered in a wonderful way that day. It bears testimony surely to the experience of praying in the Spirit such as we find explained in Romans 8, when it is too deep for words. Read verses 26-28 from the New American Standard Version of the Bible:

“And in the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for [us] with groanings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to [the will of] God. And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to [His] purpose.”

‘Too deep for words ...’ I like that! When it is too deep for words, how precious that then we can rely on the Holy Spirit! I suggest to you that Hannah’s silent prayer at the beginning of First Samuel was a kind of prototype of exactly this!

Have Thine own way, Lord! Have Thine own way!

Thou art the Potter, I am the clay.
Mold me and make me after Thy will,
While I am waiting, yielded and still.

Have Thine own way, Lord! Have Thine own way!

Search me and try me, Master, today!
Whiter than snow, Lord, wash me just now,
As in Thy presence humbly I bow.

Have Thine own way, Lord! Have Thine own way!

Wounded and weary, help me, I pray!
Power, all power, surely is Thine!
Touch me and heal me, Savior divine.

Have Thine own way, Lord! Have Thine own way!

Hold o'er my being absolute sway!
Fill with Thy Spirit till all shall see

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Christ only, always, living in me.

(Adelaide A. Pollard)

CHAPTER FOUR: GIVE US THIS DAY OUR DAILY BREAD

I remember reading the life story of George Muller. George Muller was a man of tremendous faith whom the Lord used in opening orphanages in England during the nineteenth century. After becoming a Christian at the age of twenty, he put his belief to the test for over seventy years. He set out on a venture of faith which was to make him famous, just as Charles Dickens was writing *Oliver Twist*, the book which drew the public's attention to one of Britain's major social problems then, the plight of orphans.

George Muller argued that if a poor man, simply by prayer and faith, without asking any individual obtained the means for establishing and carrying on an orphan-house: then that might be used by God to strengthen the faith of God's children, as well as being a testimony to unbelievers of the reality of the things of God. Muller opened his first home in April 1836 at the age of thirty. During the next 63 years Muller received about one and a half million pounds, that was an enormous sum of money in those days, and the many branches of his work included the care of some ten thousand children. It is fascinating to take a look at the day to day running of the orphanages by reading extracts from Muller's Journals. This was at a time when a farm labourer earned 10 shillings a week and Muller could look after 100 children for between two and three pounds a day. Here is the entry in his diary for November 11th, 1839.

Monday morning. Yesterday, when there was not a penny in hand, there was given to me, with a Bible verse Ecclesiastes 9:10, the sum of ten shillings. This morning there came in one pound ten shillings. Soon afterwards a note was sent to me from the orphan houses, to say that the need of the day would be three pounds. Just while I was reading the note I received another, including a sovereign, which a sister from Devonshire had given to one of the brethren for the orphans. So I had just the three pounds which was needed. A few minutes after came in one shilling more.

Here was certainly a man who knew what it was to pray: 'Give us day by day our daily bread!' And what wonderful answers to prayer he received. Many, many times it worked out as in the example we have just mentioned, as in answer to prayer he knew God's provision in a very timely and practical way. And so we arrive in our study of the Disciple's Prayer at the first request that has to do with ourselves and our needs. Remember the first three requests were concerning God's Name, God's Kingdom and God's Will. After having imprinted upon His disciples this great lesson that God must come first in prayer, as in everything else, and that our chief concern really ought to be with His glory, the Lord now, at this midway point of this model prayer, turns to the specific needs of the disciple. It may seem at first like a big switch from God's glory to my groceries, but what vital needs are set out for us: daily provisions, daily cleansing and daily deliverance.

So let us take the first of these today, the instruction from Luke chapter 11 and verse 3 that we should pray: "Give us day by day

our daily bread.' The focus of the request is for daily bread. The word translated 'daily' bewildered scholars for centuries. This was the only place this word occurred inside or outside the Bible. Then a few years ago, an archeologist dug up a papyrus fragment that contained a housewife's shopping list. Next to several items, guess what, the woman had scribbled this word for 'daily.' It probably meant 'enough for the coming day.' So if you pray this prayer in the morning, it is a prayer for your needs in the hours immediately ahead.

Today of course, things are a little different in practice. In societies where fridges and freezers are commonplace we tend to do a weekly shop, but let us not forget to give thanks before each meal, recognizing that God our heavenly Father is the ultimate provider. The relevance and power of this prayer request concerning daily bread can still be felt in guarding us from a spirit of independence and any selfish tendency to hoard excessively.

The word 'bread' used here can refer to actual bread or food in general, and we can extend the thought easily to cover all our physical and material needs. What it does clearly indicate is that we are to pray for the necessities of life, and not for its luxuries. Ask for bread not cake. Just the essentials to see us through the immediate future. God cares that the necessities of our material needs are met. In the Western world we have moved a long way away from subsistence economies where folks grow their own provisions. Perhaps we can more easily imagine them praying 'give us our daily bread,' as they wait for a good crop. Even though it may be a lot more indirect than that with us, if we are used to driving to the super-store for all our shopping needs and selecting them from among well-filled shelves, we must still

remember our ultimate dependence on God in all the basic essentials of life. It is only right and proper to ask God for things like employment say in order that we might earn the money with which we can go to the supermarket and buy food.

It is appropriate, too, to acknowledge His goodness in giving us a roof over our head clothes to wear, a means of transport and reasonable health. These things will enable us to take employment and earn our bread. You see, this prayer really is a declaration of dependence. It declares our dependence on God for everything, including great things and small things; spiritual things and material things; inward things and outward things. Someone has said that understanding human needs is half the job of meeting them. It is good to be reminded of our needs by this prayer with its 6 requests. I think it is very true that before we can pray we need to know what our need really is before God. In fact, I wonder if this was not what the Lord Jesus went on to teach in the following parable. Do you remember it? He said:

‘Which of you shall have a friend, and go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine has come to me on his journey, and I have nothing to set before him; and he will answer from within and say, "Do not trouble me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot rise and give to you?’ I say to you, though he will not rise and give to him because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will rise and give him as many as he needs. So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For every-

one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.”

Remember, the disciples had very shortly before asked the Lord: ‘teach us to pray.’ Now, as if still answering their question, He tells them this story about a man who certainly was in no doubt as to what his need was. How could he have walked up his neighbour’s path at midnight with some vague, half-hearted request that he had not really thought through properly? Surely this illustration teaches us of our need to wait on God to identify our true needs. Having done that, we, too, will then have the courage and boldness to persist in our asking. Sometimes, of course, our needs will be immediately obvious to us, but at other times we are a lot less sure what we should be praying for. We can be sure about asking: ‘Give us this day our daily bread.’

Guide us, O Thou great Jehovah,

Pilgrims through this barren land;

We are weak, but Thou art mighty,

Hold us with Thy powerful hand.

Bread of heaven,

Feed us now and evermore.



Open wide the living fountain

Whence the healing waters flow;

Be Thyself our fiery pillar

All the desert journey through.

Strong Deliverer!

Be Thou still our strength and shield.

(William Williams)

CHAPTER FIVE: FORGIVE US OUR SINS

They say that the first time Sawat went to the top floor of the hotel, he was shocked. Every room had a window facing the hallway and in every room a girl was sitting, many of them just 12 or 13 years old. It was Sawat's first venture into Bangkok's world of prostitution. It all began innocently enough, but soon he was caught up in it like a small piece of wood in a raging river. It was too powerful for him, too swift, and the current too strong. Soon he was selling opium to customers and propositioning tourists in the hotels. He even went so low as to help buy and sell young girls. It was a nasty business, and he was one of the important young 'business men,' as they liked to call themselves.

Sawat disgraced his family and dishonoured his father's name. He found excitement, and while he prospered in this sordid life, he was popular. But then he got robbed, and later arrested. Everything went wrong for him. He finally ended up living in a shanty by the city rubbish dump. Sitting there he thought about his family, his father. When he had left home, his father, a simple Christian man, had said to him: 'I am waiting for you.' But could it be possible that his father should still be waiting for him after all the dishonour he had brought them? Word had filtered back to his village long ago about his life of crime and sin. Finally, he wrote to his father. 'I want to come home, but I don't know if you 'll still have me after all I've done. I have sinned greatly, father. Please forgive me. On Saturday night I will be on the train

which goes through our village. If you are still waiting for me will you tie a piece of cloth on the tree in front of our house?’

During the train ride a kind stranger sat opposite Sawat and saw how nervous he was. After a while Sawat shared his story. He told the man everything. As they entered the village Sawat said, ‘Oh sir, I can’t bear to look. Could you watch for me? What if my father won’t receive me back home? Sawat buried his face between his knees. ‘Do you see it, sir? It is the only house with such a tree.’

‘Young man, your father did not hang one piece of cloth. Look! He has covered the whole tree with pieces of white cloth! He could hardly believe his eyes. There was the tree, covered, and in the front yard his old father was dancing up and down, joyously waving a piece of white cloth! His father ran beside the train, and when it stopped at the little station he threw his arms around his son, embracing him with tears of joy. ‘I’ve been waiting for you,’ he exclaimed!

That story is just like a modern version of the story about the prodigal son which Jesus told as recorded in Luke chapter 15. After demanding his inheritance money the younger of two brothers takes off and squanders it all. When reduced to feeding pigs in a far country, he comes to his senses and decides to return home saying: ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before You, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.’ (Luke 15:18,19).

His father, too, had compassion, and ran and ... kissed him.’ Isn’t it a tremendous to see illustrated in this story the kind of recep-

tion we can expect from God Himself whenever we come back to Him in genuine repentance for our sins. Perhaps we have limited the application of this story to using it in the Gospel, picturing ourselves as the prodigal before we came to Christ and knew Him as our Saviour. That is very valid, of course. But its meaning for us does not end there, once we are saved. Let us be very clear that when we believe in the Lord Jesus all our sins are forgiven and we will never have to face the penalty for past, present or future sins. Jesus bore it all on the cross. Praise the Lord!

But, of course, we do continue to sin, however much we try to avoid it. John says, in 1 John 1:8: "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves." That is very clear, isn't it? If we claim that we no longer sin, we are only deceiving or fooling ourselves. It is not that the sin will keep us from heaven, but it will keep us from enjoying the Lord and His Word. What must we do so that not even that happens? John continues: "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." This is exactly the point we have reached in the Disciple's Prayer: "Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who is indebted to us."

Every day as we come to God in prayer, perhaps at the end of the day with the day in review, we need to come in the same spirit of repentance that the prodigal had and say "Father, I've sinned, forgive me my sins." When John Wesley served as a missionary to the American colonies, he had a difficult time with General James Oglethorpe. The general was known for his pride and harshness. One day, Oglethorpe declared: 'I never

forgive.' To which Wesley's reply was: 'then I hope you never sin!' The Lord certainly links our experience of forgiveness with the condition that we forgive those who sin against us. Listen to His words from Mark's Gospel chapter 11:25: "Whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses." So a forgiving spirit is vital if our prayer life is to be effective. If we refuse to forgive someone, it means we do not appreciate God's forgiveness of us. And so the Lord taught us to say: 'Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who is indebted to us.'

We are never closer to God's grace than when we admit our sin and cry out for pardon. We are never more like God than when we extend forgiveness fully and freely to those who have sinned against us. A counsellor says of the couples who came to him with difficulties in their marriage that those who follow his advice do not split up. What is his advice to them? Simply to pray together during a whole week. I suppose that's why someone made up the little saying: 'couples who pray together, stay together.' You see, prayer, especially prayer containing real confession, revises downward our estimate of ourselves. The kind of prayer the Lord taught His disciples to pray is the kind of true prayer that causes us to have big thoughts of God and little thought for ourselves.

Even in prayer, if we are not careful, we can be guilty of self-righteous superior attitudes which might show up in the condescending or patronising way we pray for others. We can pray: "Father please help sister such-abody. She's in a mess again through not

following the advice I gave her.” The classic example is surely the Pharisee the Lord Jesus described in Luke 1:8:

“The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other men; extortioners., unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.’ And the tax collector, standing afar off would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God be merciful to me a sinner!’”

It was this second man whose prayer the Lord approved of. To go back to the story of the prodigal we were thinking about earlier and applying to our daily life as disciples, rather than attempting to say, like the older brother ... “I never transgressed your commandments at any time”, we can look back on the day, each day, and with the prodigal, say: “Father, I have sinned.”

“Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who is indebted to us.”

More holiness give me,

More strivings within,

More patience in suff'ring,

More sorrow for sin,

More faith in my Savior,

More sense of His care,

More joy in His service,

More purpose in prayer.



More gratitude give me,

More trust in the Lord,

More zeal for His glory,

More hope in His Word,

More tears for His sorrows,

More pain at His grief,

More meekness in trial,

More praise for relief.



BRIAN JOHNSTON

More victory give me,
More strength to o'ercome,
More freedom from earth-stains,
More longings for home.
More fit for the kingdom,
More useful I'd be,
More blessed and holy,
More, Savior, like Thee.

(P.P. Bliss)

CHAPTER SIX: LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION

Like the line in that hymn: ‘to live more nearly as I pray.’ There are many times when I am conscious that this is my need: to live in a way that more closely resembles how I pray. It is one thing to pray expressing great spiritual ideals; it is another thing to live hour by hour, under pressure at times, and still be consistent with the things we have prayer for. When the Lord talked about prayer, He drew a contrast with the Pharisees. He called them hypocrites. The word seems to refer to stage-actors, people who wore masks and played a part. ‘Don’t be like them,’ Jesus said, but when you pray ‘be real.’ And if this pattern for prayer is going to be real to us, then the six great issues it contains are going to have to be things which really do matter to us in the way we live our lives every day.

So I have to ask myself: How important to me in everyday life is the glory of God’s Name? Am I really concerned that He should rule supreme in my life? Is doing His will my heart’s main desire? Do I realize my total dependence on Him for everything in life? Do I mourn over my sin? And do I respond well to trial? Too often if we are honest, though that might be our prayer, our lives tell a different story. We are out to make a name for ourselves; we work to expand our influence; we try to pursue our own agenda; so often we take pride in our self-sufficiency; we make excuses for our sin and perhaps even go so far as to tempt providence. Now

that is the complete opposite of this prayer the Lord taught His disciples!

And that is why we are encouraging each other today ‘to live more nearly as we pray!’ We are surrounded in life by the temptation to live life apart from God. As we have thought, in our achievements and successes we are tempted to honour our own names as we enhance our reputations; we are tempted to build our own power-base or kingdom; tempted to take the credit for supplying our own daily needs and to deny that we have need for forgiving grace. Someone has said: “If temptation brought chains to bind us, we might resist it on our own. Instead it brings flowers and perfume, it offers life and cheer, and promises good times and satisfaction. Temptation bribes us with wealth and popularity and entices us with promises of prosperity and unbounded freedom. Only God can keep us from its charms.”

We just can’t trust ourselves to steer clear of temptation. It is so deceptive that we can easily end up playing with it and inviting it into our lives. As we come now to the last prayer request contained in the prayer: “Do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one”, we note that when we make this prayer request, we are recognizing Satan’s power, affirming our weakness, and pleading for God’s greater power. While it is true, that we need God’s help to avoid temptation, it does beg the question: ‘Why would the Lord Jesus teach His followers to pray ‘lead us not into temptation’ when God surely would never do that anyway?’

The answer to that lies in the Bible word translated ‘temptation.’ It does not need to mean enticement to do wrong, for the word

can also convey the idea of testing. When the Lord taught us to pray 'lead us not into temptation,' He was not saying that we should ask God not to entice us with evil, for God would never do a thing like that. To be sure of that, let us take note of James 1:13-15:

"Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am tempted by God;" for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. But each one is drawn away by his own desires and enticed."

So that settles it, doesn't it? God does not tempt anyone in the sense of enticing them to wrong. What then was the Lord Jesus telling us to pray for? It seems more likely that the Lord was talking about an exemption from testing, which is the other meaning the Bible word for temptation can have. Sometimes testing is necessary for our own long-term good. But how much better to live so totally for the Lord, to obey His will so completely and to trust Him so fully that very little testing is called for. As we reflect on the great theme of this model prayer should not our ambition be to live so totally for the glory of his kingdom with such priority, to obey His will with such surrender, to depend on Him for our needs so absolutely, to so sensitive to sin that very little testing is called for?

The request "do not lead us into temptation" goes on to add "but deliver us from the evil one." Protection or immunity from harm is not something that is guaranteed to the Christian, but that is not to say we cannot pray for it. Indeed we must, for we find it here as part of the Lord's blueprint guiding us as to what it means in practice to pray in the will of God and by the Spirit of God.

The prayer acknowledges that we have an adversary, the devil, who “walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour” (1 Peter 5:8). We are called to resist him, being “steadfast in the faith”. Yes, God will save us from the enticement and wiles of the devil as we look to Him for strength to overcome and depend on God for deliverance.

Some texts of this prayer as found in Matthew 6:13 contain some additional words: “For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever, Amen”. There is some dispute as to whether these words formed part of the original text, but there can be no disputing how fitting and right they are as a conclusion. It reminds me again of how many of the psalms which are prayers end on a note of triumph. Often when the psalmist has begun his prayer, wrestling with anxieties and fears after working it through in prayer in the presence of God, he concludes with a note of confidence, having received, through prayer, reassurance from on high. One time we get an example of this is when David is watching the people come and willingly bring generous donations of building materials for the Temple which Solomon would build for God at Jerusalem. When David saw their giving, his heart was moved, and he prayed these words recorded in 1 Chronicles 29:10:

“Blessed are You, LORD God of Israel, Our Father, forever and ever. Yours, Oh LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory, the victory and the majesty; for all that is in heaven and in the earth is Yours; Yours is the kingdom, Oh LORD, and You are exalted as head over all. Both riches and honour come from You, and You reign over all. In Your hand is pow-

er and might; in Your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all. Now therefore, our God, we thank You and praise Your glorious name.”

Such a worthy doxology or ascription of praise will surely be ours through eternal days, for we read in Revelation 5:31 that every creature joined in saying: “Blessing and honour and glory and power be to Him who sits on the throne!”

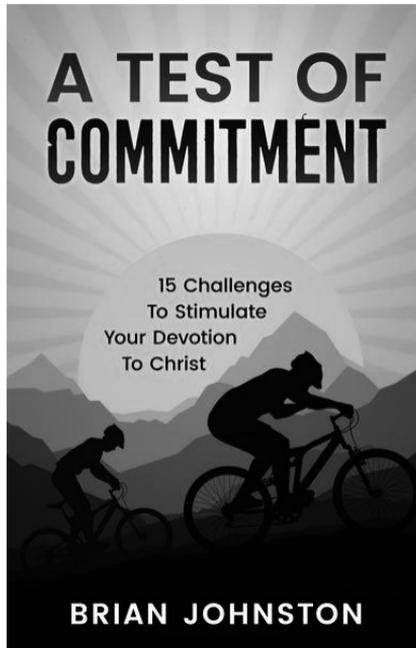
To Him who is able

To keep us – His called ones,
Preserved in Christ Jesus,
The saints of the Father-
To keep us falling,
And faultless to set us
Before His bright glory
With fulness of joy.

To the Lord God, who keepeth
Midst sin and in weakness,
Whose wisdom alone is,
To God and our Saviour
Be majesty, glory,
Dominion and power
Both now and for ever,
Amen, amen.

(Naylor)

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