

**SEEK**  
**AND YOU WILL**  
**FIND**

DISCOVERING A  
PRACTICE OF PRAYER

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# Introduction

How do you pray?

I don't mean, how does one pray, or how should, or might, some hypothetical Christian pray.

I mean, how do *you* pray?

If you're like many disciples of Jesus, you may think you don't pray enough. You may fear you're not doing it right. You may not know where to start. You may wonder what "counts" as prayer, whether you need to use words, and if so, which words to use.

There may not be anyone with whom you feel comfortable speaking these questions and doubts out loud.

And at the root of all these questions might lie a deeper one, even more challenging to name: how can I, just a regular person, a sinner by definition, approach God, who is all-knowing, all-seeing, and perfect?

Our spiritual ancestors wrestled with the same question, and they answered it through stories.

The third chapter of the book of Genesis contains one of those stories, an account of the first moment of human self-consciousness. To many, the narrative is familiar: after Adam and Eve eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they realize they're naked, and they sew themselves fig-leaf loincloths. Even after they've covered up, the sound of God their Creator "walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze" sends them into hiding.

Instead of just strolling on by, God seeks them out, calling, "Where are you?"

Through the ensuing conversation with God, human beings realize their single act of taking and eating has changed them forever. They know things now that they didn't before, and that other animals do not. They know they are naked and that they will die one day. They know they are free to do as God tells them—or not. They know that they will find it easier to blame others for deeds they regret than to take responsibility themselves—Adam points to Eve, who faults the serpent. And they know, now, that the consequences of their actions will not only affect themselves but will also reverberate through their family tree. From now on, Eden will be a lost ancestral land, for which their descendants will long.

Even as they gain all of these disturbing, even painful, new insights, Adam and Eve see that their actions haven't destroyed their Creator's love for them. God's final act before the couple leaves Eden is to hand-sew the clothing that will protect them in their new life.

Perhaps the most important thing Adam and Eve know, as they depart, is that even when shame drives them to slink behind the nearest tree, God will seek them out. The all-knowing, all-seeing God who brought them into being and sustains their every breath asks questions like, "Where are you?" "Who told you that you were naked?" and "What is this that you have done?" Even though God (presumably) already knows the answers to these queries, their Creator wants to stay in conversation with them, and by giving an account of their actions, they might learn to understand themselves better. More accurately, God wants to *start* that conversation with

them. God is always interested, always ready to listen, even before we're ready to speak.

Adam and Eve's conversation with God, who asks, "Where are you?" is humanity's first prayer.



The first human beings may have discovered that prayer begins when we stand exposed before God, but virtually every person since then has resisted that insight. One of my favorite stories about prayer, told to me by my friend, the late United Methodist pastor Vernon C. Tyson, encapsulates our resistance.

An elderly widow shared with him a regret that had gnawed at her since her husband of nearly sixty years had died: that she had never loved him as well as he had deserved. When Vernon pointed out that she had always appeared to be a devoted wife, she poured out the story she had kept locked up for decades. In her late teens, she had fallen madly in love with Billy, the handsome, witty boy of her dreams and a great dancer, too. But he left her for another girl, and by the time he came to his senses and begged forgiveness, it was too late. She was already engaged to the old friend who had swooped in to woo her away from the man he believed had never deserved her. They committed to a life together; Billy moved away, and she and Billy never spoke again.

But from time to time over the years, she had thought of her first love. Now, with her husband gone and her own mortality looming, she worried. Had he realized she sometimes reminisced about Billy? Even if he hadn't, had the regret she felt over losing her first love infected her marriage, holding her back from showing her husband the affection he deserved?

Vernon gently reassured her: she and her husband had built a life on shared interests, raised kind children together, and enjoyed their time as empty-nesters. The smiles Vernon had seen on her husband's

face as he looked at her had told their pastor everything he needed to know about the state of their marriage. And, he admonished the widow, she shouldn't forget how lovingly she had nursed her husband in his final months.

The lady's hesitant smile acknowledged Vernon might be right. When he said, "Why don't we pray?" she bowed her head. She relaxed as her pastor thanked God for long life, for the gift of marriage and children, for the shared joys and companionship that had seen her and her husband through hard times. "And, Lord," he added, "we thank you for the fervor of youth, for the gift of romance, and for a boy named Billy."

With that, his parishioner's head snapped up, her eyes flew open, and she gasped, "Reverend Tyson! Don't tell God *that!*"



At times, I have been that elderly widow, and I suspect you may have too. But the bedrock assumption of Christian prayer, affirmed by scripture and tradition dating back before the origins of the church, is that we have nothing to fear by standing naked before God. When we cry out to God, we respond to the One who has already reached out to us. God has already initiated our conversation because our Creator wants to be in relationship with us. Even though God already knows each of us better than we will ever know ourselves, God delights in us so deeply that the overwhelming divine desire is to keep company with us. Rashi, the medieval French rabbi, makes this point. Walking in Eden's pleasant evening breeze, God knew perfectly well where Adam was, Rashi says. Still, God asked, "Where are you?" Rashi contends God "asked this in order to enter into language with him."<sup>1</sup> Even knowing that humanity had already begun to separate from the easy union between Creator and beloved creatures, God wanted to start a conversation with human beings.

Time devoted to being consciously in the presence of God, speaking and listening, and also in companionable silence is prayer. It's time

that deepens our relationship with God: the kind of time we devote to friends, family, lovers, spouses; time passed talking, revealing ourselves, and also listening, getting to know the other, growing ever closer; time that shapes us into better friends of God, better neighbors to each other, and ultimately better nurturers of ourselves too. Prayer is one way in which we fulfill the Great Commandment to love God, our neighbor, and ourselves, and it's the foundation of everything else we do to show that love.

For something so integral to the practice of our faith, prayer remains stubbornly mysterious. You and I have questions about prayer as old as Christianity itself: What happens when we pray? Do our prayers change anything? How should we pray?

Most obviously, we pray because Jesus did, and he told his disciples to do so as well. The gospels tell us that, along with participating in sabbath prayers in synagogues and praying in front of the crowds gathered around him, Jesus frequently went off to commune alone with God. He encouraged his friends to pray for the things they needed and even for things they wanted. When needing guidance, they asked him, "Lord, teach us to pray," he obliged, offering what Christians call the Lord's Prayer. And he went further, encouraging his friends to speak boldly to God who seeks us out with the determination of a shepherd going after an errant sheep or a woman sweeping until her lost coin glitters among the gathered dust, who loves us even more deeply than the most nurturing parent. "Ask," Jesus said, "and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!"<sup>2</sup>

If I had been in the crowd gathered around Jesus the day he offered that reassurance, I imagine I would have felt both relieved to know that God wanted me to voice my needs and desires and also skeptical.

Would I have been brave enough to voice my skepticism? To say, “Jesus, I have worked as an advocate for child survivors of sexual abuse and child witnesses to domestic violence. I have known infants who no longer cried because they had already learned it was useless—no one would answer, and I have met parents who justified child abuse as acts of love. I have prayed for all those children and parents, and I don’t know if my prayers ever did any good.”

These questions about whether our prayers make a difference didn’t originate with me. In the fifth century, Saint Augustine of Hippo responded to Proba, a widow who had written him about prayer, that Christians ought to feel “desolate”: conscious of our separation from God, conscious of the distance between our lives and what God desires for us. That sense of desolation, itself, should lead us to “continue in prayer, and learn to fix the eye of faith on the word of the divine scriptures as ‘on a light shining in a dark place until the dawn, and the day-star arise in our hearts.’”<sup>3</sup> Centuries later, Thomas Aquinas laid out three effects of prayer. First, the merit of the act (it is, itself, a good thing for Christians to do); second, what he called “impetration,” or beseeching God to give us the good things God indeed wants to provide; and third, “the spiritual refreshment of the mind.”<sup>4</sup> As we beseech God to provide good things—for the abused children I worked with, among others—we may also become aware of the ways in which we can align ourselves with God’s actions by sharing what we have with our neighbors. In Aquinas’s words, our actions can align us with God’s purposes in the same way that time set apart for prayer can: “As long as a person is acting in their heart, speech, or work in such a manner that they are tending toward God, they are praying; and thus one who is directing their whole life toward God is praying always.”<sup>5</sup>

Ideally, if we are listening for God and to God, our desires will, although perhaps at a glacial pace, become aligned with God’s desires for us and our neighbors. In other words, by grace, we may eventually stop praying for those things we don’t truly need or even, in the deepest reaches of ourselves, really want. By grace, as we pray for our neighbors who are suffering, we may be moved to offer

them something of what they need—whether emotional, spiritual, or material—out of the good things God has given us. Fourteenth-century English mystic Julian of Norwich, who lived through the devastation of the plague and offered hope to a traumatized generation, wrote, “Prayer unites the soul to God.” By God’s own grace, prayer shrinks the gap that sin carves between humanity and divinity. God teaches us to pray and to trust we will receive what we request, “for,” as Julian said, “he beholds us in love, and wants to make us partners in his good will and work....Therefore we pray to him urgently that he may do what is pleasing to him, as if he were to say: How could you please me more than by entreating me, urgently, wisely, and sincerely, to do the thing that I want to have done? And so the soul by prayer is made of one accord with God.”<sup>6</sup>

Like our forebears all the way back to humanity’s first moment of consciousness, you and I pray as sinners in a world marked by sin, death, epic tragedies, and mundane disappointments. Innocent children die while tyrants live into their nineties. Hurricanes and earthquakes devastate nations already plundered by colonial powers and the legacy of enslavement. That all this transpires despite fervent prayer is a sorrowful mystery that, it seems, won’t be resolved this side of eternal life.

And yet Christians trust that we pray also as beloved children of God in a world transformed by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus; in a world shaped by the power of the Holy Spirit, who moves within us. Jesus offers us a faith rooted in an empty tomb and shapes us into a community within which we are called to, in Paul’s words, “rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep” (Romans 12:15). The Lord who taught his friends to pray also offered an implicit rebuke when they were unable to exorcise a particularly stubborn demon that, in the end, Jesus himself had to deal with. When his disciples asked, “Why could we not cast it out?” Jesus explained, “This kind can come out only through prayer” (Mark 9:29). By prayer, he seemed to mean the unity with God that he embodied and that Christians like Julian have suggested is possible for us, too.

Jesus's assessment of his friends' work has implications for his disciples today. If demons—the body-crushing, soul-sucking forces of death that wear many disguises—still romp their way through God's redeemed creation, the gospels seem to suggest this is true not only because we live in a fallen world but also because we Christians have not fully tapped the power that lies within us, as the Body of Christ. Through prayer, we align ourselves with that power.



How, then, shall we pray?

You may have heard it said, or you may yourself have said, “I can pray anywhere, doing anything. My work is my prayer; watching my children play in prayer; doing yoga or walking in the woods in prayer.” And in a sense, any time passed consciously in God's presence can be a form of prayer.

But our relationship with God, like all our relationships, needs to have time specifically devoted to it to flourish. Time in which you reveal yourself; time in which you listen, pay attention to the other. Time to appreciate the long-established patterns of the relationship, and time enough to be surprised, too, by learning new things about the other or the insights about yourself they reflect back to you. Teresa of Ávila, a sixteenth-century mystic, writer, and founder of the Discalced Carmelite Order, offered reassurance to her sisters who were nervous about approaching God, hesitant to engage the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of the universe as one would a friend. She said that God “will inspire you with what to say,” and asked, “Since you speak with other persons, why must words fail you more when you speak with God?”<sup>7</sup> Like Teresa's nuns, most of us need help to learn how to approach God and cultivate our relationship.

Over the past two thousand years, Christians have developed techniques and practices of prayer to help devote time to their friendship with God and, by grace, to grow as a result.

I wrote this book to help you learn and practice some of those forms of prayer. In the chapters that follow, I reflect on a variety of different prayers or practices:

*the Lord's Prayer*

*Holy Eucharist (variously called the Mass, Holy Communion, and the Lord's Supper)*

*the Daily Office (sets of prayers prescribed for various times of the day)*

*praying with the psalms*

*the rosary*

*the intercession of the saints*

*Ignatian prayer (imaginative prayer, the examen, and the Spiritual Exercises, practices developed by Saint Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Society of Jesus)*

*Lectio Divina*

*praying through song*

*movement prayers*

*silent prayers*

*working with a spiritual director*

Woven into these practices are some or all of the various types of Christian prayer:

*adoration (placing oneself consciously in the presence of God, or more aptly, remembering that one is already there, for the sheer pleasure of keeping company with God)*

*praise (glorifying God for who God is)*

*thanksgiving (for what God has done for us and/or for others)*

*penitence (confessing our sins)*

*oblation (offering our lives and labors to God)*

*intercession (asking for good things for other people)*

*petition (asking for good things for ourselves)<sup>8</sup>*

In these reflections, I offer glimpses of my own prayer life as an Episcopal priest, a spiritual director in the tradition of Saint Ignatius, and one whose own spiritual nurturer of many years is a member of the Society of Friends (also called Quakers). In my prayer, work, and play, I seek to be what the Jesuits (members of Ignatius's Society of Jesus) call "a contemplative in action": a Christian who pauses, reflects, and then resumes activity before pausing and reflecting again. By grace and over time, this cycle helps me better to appreciate and accept God's love for me and also helps me better show love to my fellow creatures of God. Habitual prayer becomes the basis for faithful action.

My approach to prayer is inevitably shaped by the fact that I am a North American of European origin, a respectfully (I hope) appreciative student and observer of cultures that are not my own, and yet limited in my perspective as everyone is. I hope this book may be a springboard to those readers who may turn elsewhere to learn more about, for example, First Nations' adaptations of Anglican daily prayers or the charismatic, ecstatic experiences of prayer often associated with the Pentecostal tradition.

Throughout this book, I share some of my joys, offer some confessions, and possibly even bear witness to the occasional miracle. All this comes with an invitation for you to learn and explore the various types of prayers and, ultimately, to discover your own practice of prayer. As you try the various forms of prayer offered in these pages, please be gentle with yourself. Consistent practice of prayer typically offers benefits, but people often feel self-conscious when adopting a new form of prayer. It's also common to experience periodic "dry spells" in our relationship with God. You may find it easier to notice patterns in your practice and gain insight into your relationship with God and your neighbor if you keep a prayer journal, whether in a bound book, on a computer, through a notes app on your phone or in the margins of this book, by sketching, or in any other way that allows you to store your observations and return to them later. Talking with a friend, prayer group, or spiritual director can be helpful too. And remember, temperament plays a role in our

prayer, just as it does in other areas of life. Some of these practices may stick with you for a lifetime or only for a season. Some may never resonate with you at all. This book is simply an invitation to you to try on any or all of them to see how they might fit.

It is my hope that you won't journey through these pages alone. Even though many forms of prayer can be practiced alone, Christian prayer is fundamentally a community endeavor. The prayer Jesus taught his disciples opens with "Our Father" for a reason. A devout Jew, Jesus was raised in a faith that prioritized corporate prayer. Even though he went off to pray by himself from time to time and encouraged his followers to do the same, he always returned to the group. After his resurrection and ascension, his disciples regularly gathered to pray. The two foundational sacraments of the church, baptism and eucharist, explicitly bring us into Jesus Christ's Body and then nourish us as members of that Body. Even when we pray alone, we're still connected at a mystical level with the Body's other members, in this life and the next.

To help you and your companions along the way, I offer guidelines at the end of each chapter about how to start practicing each form of prayer and questions to help you reflect on those experiences. As you use this book, I pray that you will come to know yourself better as God's beloved, and I pray you will also grow closer to siblings in Christ as you seek, together, to deepen your friendship with God who delights in us all and is already calling us to draw closer.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Discussed in Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Murmuring Deep: Reflections on the Biblical Unconscious* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2009), 19. Thanks to Lauren F. Winner for the reference.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 7:7-11, New International Version.

<sup>3</sup> Augustine, Letter 130, quoting 2 Peter 1:19, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1102130.htm>, accessed 29 February 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 83:13, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/3083.htm#article13>, accessed 29 February 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Cited in Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works*, trans. George E. Ganss, SJ (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1991), 459 (gender-neutral language mine).

<sup>6</sup> Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, trans. James Walsh, SJ, and ed. Edmund Colledge, OSA, (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1978), 253-254.

<sup>7</sup> Teresa of Ávila, “The Way of Perfection,” 27:9, in *The Collected Works, Vol. Two*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, OCD, and Otilio Rodríguez (Washington, D.C.: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1980).

<sup>8</sup> Various typologies of Christian prayer exist. Here I follow the one given in the Catechism of the Book of Common Prayer 1979 of the Episcopal Church, 856; <https://bcponline.org/>.

# The Lord's Prayer

That Sunday morning in Bethlehem's Christmas Lutheran Church, I hadn't understood a word of the scripture readings or Pastor Mitri Raheb's homily. I hadn't expected to. A dozen fellow seminarians and I had signed up for this intensive course, led by our Hebrew professor, to visit Israel and the West Bank and get to know their people. A sense of dislocation was part of the package deal. We holders of North American passports sailed through checkpoints where Palestinians waited for hours in the sun on the off chance they might be admitted to Israel to work that day. We listened to the frustrations and dreams of people from all ethnic backgrounds and political persuasions, people who could meet with us but not with each other because of the Israeli government's travel restrictions. And we snapped digital photographs of each other beside the 10,000-year-old walls of Jericho and the house at Capernaum that may well have belonged to the Apostle Peter's mother.

In Pastor Mitri's church, I felt a little more at home. When he stood behind the altar and lifted the bread, he uttered one of the few Arabic words I knew—*layla*, night. I realized he was repeating the story Christians have told since our earliest days, the story Paul repeated

in his first letter to the church in Corinth, which we have come to call the “words of institution” of the eucharist. “The Lord Jesus on the night he was betrayed took bread...In the same way he took the cup also...”

But it was after Pastor Mitri had lifted the consecrated bread and broken it that our visiting group truly found our place in the liturgy. After lowering the bread and keeping a moment of silence, he began to speak again, and the congregation joined in. I couldn’t understand a word, but the rhythm was so familiar that I began to pray too, in English. “Our Father in heaven...” One by one, all the way along our pew, we visitors linked hands and offered the words Jesus Christ himself taught us.



The Lord’s Prayer, often called the Our Father, is the prayer millions of Christians around the world recite every day—and millions more turn to in stressful moments. We repeat it at virtually every worship service; we teach it to our children. In whatever language we offer the prayer, we make Jesus’s original Aramaic words our own. If prayer is conversation with God, Jesus gave us an icebreaker.

Christians have been using this icebreaker since the earliest days of what was first called the Way, which we now call the church (the community of shared practice and mutual care that helps each other follow Jesus). *The Didache*, a first-century manual of how to live together as Christians, instructs Christians to offer the prayer three times a day (*Didache* means “training,” as in the teaching a master artisan would give an apprentice).<sup>1</sup> Third- and fourth-century bishops like Saint Cyprian of Carthage and Saint Augustine of Hippo offered instruction to the faithful on how and why to pray the Lord’s Prayer, and the earliest monastic rules assume monks and nuns will do so several times a day.

Not only does the Lord's Prayer come to us from the gospels (of Matthew and Luke, to be precise), but second-century North African writer Tertullian called it "the epitome of the whole Gospel."<sup>2</sup> Former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams echoed Tertullian by saying, "If somebody said, give me a summary of Christian faith on the back of an envelope, the best thing to do would be to write Our Lord's Prayer."<sup>3</sup> In Matthew's Gospel, the prayer appears as one part of what we call the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus's long series of lessons about what a life devoted to loving God and one's neighbor looks like. Amidst his teachings about how to pray, fast, give alms, and forgive, Jesus warns against "heap[ing] up empty phrases." Instead, he offers a simple series of affirmations and petitions:

Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name.  
Your kingdom come.  
Your will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our debts,  
as we also have forgiven our debtors.  
And do not bring us to the time of trial,  
but rescue us from the evil one.<sup>4</sup>

The Lord's Prayer does two things: glorify God and ask that our physical and spiritual needs be met. Although the prayer is uniquely precious to Christians, it is deeply rooted in Jesus's Jewish tradition.<sup>5</sup> Contrary to some Christian claims, Jesus was not the first to call God Father. "I will be a father to him," the Lord promised David, speaking of the future King Solomon; centuries later, the prophet Malachi asked his people, "Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us?"<sup>6</sup>

Beyond his familiarity with the concept of God as Father, Jesus was raised on scriptural texts exalting God, like the command found in Leviticus 22:32, "You shall not profane my holy name, that I may be

sanctified among the people of Israel: I am the LORD,” and the human affirmation in Psalm 113, “Let the name of the LORD be blessed, from this time forth for evermore. From the rising of the sun to its going down let the name of the LORD be praised.” And the sense that God is ever-present, caring for God’s children even when they feel cut off from their divine Parent, permeates prophetic books like Isaiah: “Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.”<sup>7</sup> For Christians, the words “Our Father” remind us that the Son prays with us and that we are kin to everyone who calls on the one, living God as Jesus did.

The prayer’s opening words also have what New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine calls “a political edge.” Jesus lived his life as a member of a nation ruled over by the Roman Emperor; his homeland was occupied by Caesar’s army. Caesar was commonly called “father” to signify his authority over his subjects and their supposed child-like dependence on him. But for Jesus, a faithful Jew, Caesar has no monopoly on his subjects’ loyalty nor is he the highest authority over them. “By speaking of the ‘Father in heaven,’” Levine notes, “Jesus thus insists that Rome is not the ‘true’ father.”<sup>8</sup> Twenty-first-century people need a reminder of history to catch this nuance of meaning, but it would have been clear to Jesus’s first-century audience—Jews, Gentiles, and Roman occupiers alike.

Christians of different times and places have reminded themselves and each other of the political implications of addressing God as “Our Father.” One example is Muriel Lester, an English peace activist and associate of Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi was a leader of the Indian campaign for liberation from British rule and a strong influence on Martin Luther King Jr. and others committed to the African-American freedom struggle. Just before the Second World War, Lester wrote of the world’s need for people who would struggle non-violently for justice: “Unless God meant the human race to be actually one family, we have no right to the phrase ‘Our Father.’ Unless Jesus was misinterpreting God, we cannot overcome evil with evil, or gain

security by armies and navies, or defend ourselves by preparing to kill potential enemies.”<sup>9</sup> The Lord’s Prayer can both comfort and convict us as we pray for God’s help to live as Jesus’s friends.



When we’re too tired or frightened to compose our own prayers, when we’re not sure we can trust our own desires enough to voice them to God, or when we want to join other Christians in a prayer that crosses denominational divisions, the Lord’s Prayer gives us words to express what we need. This has long been true. Drawing on his study of Augustine’s writings, the medieval scholar Thomas Aquinas wrote that in the Lord’s Prayer, “not only do we ask for all that we may rightly desire, but also in the order wherein we ought to desire them, so that this prayer not only teaches us to ask, but also directs all our affections.” We start by glorifying God, implicitly asking to participate more fully in God’s life. The divine name is already holy, and yet we pray that people might treat it as holy; God already reigns, and yet we pray that God’s will might be perfectly done and that God might equip us to do it here and now. And then we move on to asking God to meet our needs: to feed us, both physically with enough food for today and also with a foretaste of the heavenly banquet through the eucharist; to forgive us; to keep us from trials we fear may undo us, as Jesus himself prayed on the night of his arrest, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me”; and to rescue us from evil, whether the evil comes from outside ourselves or inside.<sup>10</sup> And we pray all these things knowing—or at least, trying to trust—that God desires our well-being not only in this life but in the age to come.

All of that is a lot for one prayer to contain. And yet, it’s all there within the prayer Jesus left us as part of our inheritance from him.

At times, each of us may find some of the prayer’s petitions harder to voice than others. Might “hallowed be your name” evoke a needle of

shame at having yelled a few choice words in a fit of anger? If we're used to having enough to eat, do we glide over "Give us today our daily bread" as if we weren't dependent on God for our sustenance? Do we consider what we could do to ensure at least one neighbor also has what they need? When we hear "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us," are we spurred to be more forgiving, or are we unduly hard on ourselves, forgetting all the times we have, in fact, forgiven hurts both deep and trifling? Do we pray for people who are being harmed in ways that may make forgiveness challenging and reconciliation well-nigh impossible (in this life, anyway), and ask God for the ability to assist them in respectful ways? Do we support efforts to limit the harm human beings can inflict on each other? When offered thoughtfully and honestly, the Lord's Prayer can serve as a call to confession, a spur to amend our lives, and a channel of God's gracious power to aid us in revealing more of the divine reign on earth.



A complete prayer in itself, the Our Father is also a model for our personal prayers. Start by praising God, pray for God's will to be done, and then ask for what you need and want, even if you're afraid you might not get those things or won't receive them in the time frame you had in mind. Be as simple and direct as you can while knowing that God has all the time in the world— and boundless love—with which to listen. As you offer these prayers in your own words, you'll be following the example Jesus set, and you'll be learning what he teaches.

## Questions to consider and things to try

- ⊕ Notice where the Lord's Prayer comes up in corporate prayers, like in the eucharist. Does praying it in a group feel different from praying it on your own? Reflect on the differences and see what insights may follow your observations.
- ⊕ Pray the Lord's Prayer once through, and then again more slowly, pausing over each petition. Notice the words that catch your attention, and consider what God may be saying to you through them.

*Alternatively, pause after each petition to consider its specific meaning for you now. For example, as you pray, "Hallowed be your name," consider: for what, specifically, do you praise God in this moment? "Your will be done": what is one way in which you long to see God's will done? Offer those prayers.*

- ⊕ If you normally worship in your native language, try learning the Lord's Prayer in a different language, perhaps one common among immigrants where you live or a language your ancestors may have spoken. How does praying these well-known words in an unfamiliar tongue affect your experience of the moment?
- ⊕ Write a prayer modeled on the Our Father, addressing and praising God in your own words and offering your own petitions for yourself and others.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Aaron Milavec, *The Didache: Text, Translation, Analysis, and Commentary* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 8:3.

<sup>2</sup> Tertullian, “On Prayer,” Chapter 1, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0322.htm>, accessed 21 March 2020.

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/prayer/lordsprayer\\_1.shtml](https://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/prayer/lordsprayer_1.shtml), accessed 10 April 2020; Archbishop Rowan Williams and Sister Wendy Beckett, *Living the Lord’s Prayer* (Oxford: Lion UK, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 6:9-13. Translations of the prayer have varied somewhat over time, but Matthew’s version, rather than Luke’s virtually identical but shorter prayer (which you can find in his gospel at 11:2-4), is the one familiar to most Christians. In different versions of the prayer, “debts” might be rendered “trespasses” or “sins.” The doxology with which many Christians conclude the prayer (“For the kingdom and the power and the glory are yours...”) was added in the first century, appearing, for example, in *The Didache*.

<sup>5</sup> Amy-Jill Levine and Mark Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Annotated New Testament, 2nd ed.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017) offers this background on the Lord’s Prayer and is a helpful corrective to harmful myths about the relationship between Judaism and Christianity.

<sup>6</sup> 2 Samuel 7:14, 1 Chronicles 22:9-10, Malachi 2:10.

<sup>7</sup> Isaiah 49:15; the “I” speaking is God.

<sup>8</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 44-45.

<sup>9</sup> Muriel Lester, *It Occurred to Me* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1938), 278.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae 83:9, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/3083.htm#article9>, accessed 4 April 2020.