

The Lord's Prayer ~ Leader's Guide

1. The 18 traditional synagogue prayers from early days had openings such as, "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob," "holy one," "builder of Jerusalem," "mighty one, and "gracious one." Why do you think Jesus taught his disciples to pray to "Abba" (*our Father*)? What kind of relationship does it affirm?

Jesus affirmed a vision of family and faith that went beyond the community that claimed a racial tie to Abraham. By contrast, every human being of any tribe or nation has a father. Therefore, if God is "Our Father," all people are able to address him equally. There is no racial or historical "insider" or "outsider."

In the Old Testament, the word father is used 12 times in connection with God sometimes as a simile ("this is like that" –Psalm 103:13) or a metaphor ("this is that" –Isaiah 63:16, 64:8) but never as a direct address. The difference is obvious: To say, "you care for us *like* a father," (simile) or "you *are* our Father" (metaphor) is one thing, but to say, "Good morning, Father," is quite different.

Jesus, by using the great Aramaic word, "Abba," affirms both respect in addressing a superior and a profound personal relationship between the one who uses it and the one addressed.

2. "Hallowed" is not a common word today. Just what does it mean? Can we humans make God's name holy or unholy? (Ezekiel 36:16-23) Who can make God's name holy? When we say, "hallowed be thy name," what are we asking for?

The word *hallowed* means to make holy, to respect greatly, to revere or treat as sacred.

God's holy name can be defiled by the disobedience of his people as we see in Ezekiel 36:21-23 – ²¹ But I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations to which they came. ²² Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. ²³ I will sanctify my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them; and the nations shall know that I am the Lord, says the Lord God, when through you I display my holiness before their eyes. [NRSV]

In the preceding verses, Israel is told it had defiled the land by shedding blood and worshipping idols. God then drove the people out and in the process God's own holy name was defiled in the eyes of the Gentile nations because God seemed too weak to save the Israelites. God then announces that he will sanctify his name, i.e., make it holy. This is summarized in Ezekiel 20:41-42 – "I will manifest my holiness among you in the sight of the nations. ⁴² You shall know that I am the

Lord, when I bring you into the land of Israel...” So we see that it is God himself who demonstrates his name to be holy

Only God can make his name holy and he does so through mighty acts in history. God makes his name holy by demonstrating his holiness (Isaiah 6:1-5).

By saying “hallowed by thy name,” the worshiper is saying, “May God again demonstrate his holiness.” As that holiness is demonstrated, we sense that we are unclean. Nevertheless, because God is holy, his people must be holy and we are challenged to achieve and maintain that holiness (Deut 7:6, 26:18) Deut 7:6 – For you are a holy people, who belong to the Lord your God. Of all the people on earth, the Lord your God has chosen you to be his own special treasure.

The worshiper is also saying that he respects God’s name, honors it, reveres it, praises it, worships it, fears it, and walks in God’s ways.

3. There are three paradoxes on Jesus’ teachings about the kingdom of God. This is like three railroad trains moving side by side on three separate tracks. If any rail is removed or if the trains move onto one track, there will be a wreck. Each train must move on its own track of two rails. The three paradoxes are:

A) The kingdom of God has come in Christ (Luke 11:20) but that same kingdom is still in the future (Matthew 6:10)

B) The kingdom of God (and the end of all things) is near (1 Peter 4:7, 1 Cor 7:29, Romans 13:12) but it is still far off (parables in Luke 19:12-27, Matt 25:14-30)

C) Jesus describes many signs of the coming of the kingdom (Luke 21:5-36) but then says only the father knows the time of the end (Matt 24:36, Mark 13:32)

Given that we don’t now and can never truly understand the kingdom of God, what does it mean when we pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven?”

In heaven, the will of God flows like a great river with no barriers. On earth, sin interrupts the flow of God’s desire for good for all people. We pray, asking that we might enjoy his perfect will on earth as it is enjoyed in heaven. However, because all we humans have free will, the phrase also obliges each Christ follower to care about the earth, what happens to it and to the people who live on it. So this phrase in a sense is a request to God to remind us—and perhaps help us—with our obligation to work toward bringing the qualities of God’s kingdom to earth: love, justice, equality, peace, kindness and other fruits of the spirit (Galatians 5:22-23)

4. Using the Greek word, the next petition is “give us this day our *epiousios* bread,” which can be translated as *today*, *tomorrow*, or [an] *amount*. So the phrase can mean, “the bread of today,” “the bread of tomorrow,” or “the bread we need.” Given this broadened definition, what would be a good translation of this phrase?

A Syriac translation from the second century [Syriac is closely related to Aramiac] is perhaps the oldest translation from the Greek into any language. It translates this phrase as, “Give us today the bread that doesn’t run out.” This deals with the dread human fear of economic lack. Will we have enough? What if I lose my job? What if the kids get sick? How will we survive?

Fear of not having enough to eat can destroy a sense of well-being in the present and erode hope for the future. So Jesus teaches his disciples a prayer that means, “Deliver us, O Lord, from the fear of not having enough to eat. Give us bread for today and with it give us the confidence that tomorrow we will have enough.”

And note that it is called *our* bread, not *my* bread. Also, it is *bread*, not *cake* meaning we ask for all that sustains life, but not any extras.

5. Not only are we admonished to forgive others, but in two verses after the prayer, what does Jesus say will happen if we don’t? (Matthew 6:12-15). Different Bible translations ask God to forgive unfulfilled obligations, i.e., debts [KJV, ESV, NASB, NIV], or doing the wrong thing: sins [LB, NLT, NCV], trespasses [Anglican, Episcopal, Roman Catholic, Lutheran], and wrongs [CEV, REB]. Which do you like best? Actually, Jesus said to forgive *kihoba*, an Aramiac word which means *both* debts and sins. How do you like that meaning? How can we best express what forgiveness we are asking for from God?

Keying on the word used by Jesus, Christians must remember that we are both asking for forgiveness for failing to fulfill what God requires of you (debts) and for failing to do the right thing when you do act (trespasses, sins, or wrongs).

6. We then must forgive others. Does that mean that injustice will be tolerated by Christians? Is anger necessary to fuel the struggle for justice?

Those who pray this prayer are not affirming that injustice can continue, that it doesn’t really matter. The prayer asks the person who wants justice to forgive the other. Through such forgiveness the bitterness, anger, hatred, and desire for revenge are drained out of the struggle and the offender now contends with someone who may be able to feel genuine compassion. The struggle for justice may well continue, but now there are things the offended person will not do. The day of victory will not become a day of vengeance.

The world despises this theology because it thinks anger is necessary to fuel the struggle for justice, and that forgiveness will dissipate that anger. The Christian disagrees and responds, “No, I will forgive *and* I will struggle for justice. I may still be angry, but my struggle for justice will be purified by forgiveness and thereby become more effective.”

7. The phrase, “lead us not into temptation” can also be translated, “do not bring us to the time of trial.” [NRSV]. Will God tempt you? (James 1:13) Assuming God will not tempt you, what then does this petition mean?

God will never tempt anyone (James 1:13 – When tempted, no one should say, “God is tempting me.” For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone). God may and probably will subject you to tests and trials as he did with Abraham (Genesis 22:1-19).

This petition may be translated in three ways, all of which are equally valid. First, when you are on a difficult mountain or desert trek, you want a good guide who knows the way and is capable of coping with any emergency. In this case, what this petition says is, “Lord we trust you to guide us because you alone know the way we must go.”

Second, Jeremias believes that the Greek word for “lead us” should not be translated as a *causative* word (i.e., do not cause us...or do not lead us...) but as a *permissive* word meaning do not permit us to go into trials or temptations. On our faith journey, our tendency is often to give into trials and temptations and thus we are instructed to pray, “Oh, Lord, hold us back and do not let us take that path.” As John Calvin says, “conscious of our own weakness, we ask to be defended by God’s protection that we may have an impregnable position against all the devices of Satan.”

Third, Father Matta al-Miskin notes that during Holy Week Jesus warns Peter, saying, “Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail.” (Luke 22:31-32). Jesus does not promise Peter that there will be no time of trial. Peter pledges loyalty even unto death, but then falls asleep. Jesus awakens Peter and tells him to watch and pray lest he fall into temptation, but Peter does not pray and soon thereafter fails in his time of trial by denying Jesus three times. When we pray, argues Father Matta, we are protected by Jesus from Satan and his attacks.

The real meaning of this petition may well be a combination of all three possibilities above, i.e., a request to God for guidance, defense, and protection.

Much of the above discussion was adapted from Part 3 (The Lord’s Prayer) of the book, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* by Kenneth E. Bailey, IVP Academic, 2008.

An excellent web site on exploring and applying the Lord’s Prayer can be found at: <http://www.lords-prayer.co.uk/index.html>. For 15 versions of the Lord’s prayer, go to: <http://www.angelfire.com/folk/jeffthefinn/index1.html>