

## The LORD'S PRAYER

**For many prayer is an enigma.**

**Few people know the meaning of the words they recite**

LUKE 11:2-4	MATTHEW 6:9-13
'Father, hallowed be Your name.  Your kingdom come.  'Give us each day our daily bread.  'And forgive us our sins, For we ourselves also forgive everyone who is indebted to us.  And lead us not into temptation.'"	'Our Father who is 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 lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil.  For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.'

Three forms of the Lord's Prayer exist in early Christian literature--two in the New Testament (Matt. 6:9-13; Luke 11:2-4) and the other in the Didache 8:2, a non-canonical Christian writing of the early second-century from northern Syria.

**Three conclusions derive from such comparison.**

First, it is the same prayer in all three cases.

Second, the Didache likely uses the form of the prayer found in Matthew.

Third, Matthew's version is longer than that of Luke at three points:

- at the end of the address to God,
- at the end of the petitions related to God,
- and at the end of the petitions related to humans.

Also, study of the Greek manuscripts shows that the doxology that appears at the end of the Matthean form in some translations is not original;

the earliest form of the prayer with a doxology in Didache 8:2.

It is likely that each Evangelist gave the prayer as it was generally used in his own church at the time.

Matthew and Luke used the Lord's Prayer in different ways in their Gospels.

In Matthew the prayer appears in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus spoke about a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees (5:20). It is located in a section that warns against practicing one's piety before men in order to be seen by them (6:1-18). Almsgiving, praying, and fasting are for God's eyes and ears. When praying one should not make a public display (6:5-6) nor heap up empty phrases, thinking that one will be heard for many words (6:7). Prayer should be private and brief. The Lord's Prayer serves as an example or how to pray briefly. It is seen as a substitute for the wrong kind of prayer.

In Luke the prayer comes in the midst of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem (9:51-19:46). In His behavior Jesus is an example of one who prays. His prayer life caused one of His disciples to ask for instruction in prayer, as John the Baptist had given his disciples. What follows (11:2-13) is a teaching on prayer in which the disciples are told what to pray for (11:2-4) and why to

pray (11:5-13). Here the Lord's Prayer is a model of what to pray for. To pray in this way is a distinguishing mark of Jesus' disciples.

Although all three versions of the prayer exist only in Greek the thought pattern and expressions are Jewish. In the address, God is designated "Father" or "Our Father who art in heaven."

One Jewish prayer begins: "Forgive us, Our Father" (Eighteen Benedictions, 6).

Rabbi Akiba (about A.D. 130) said: "Happy are you Israelites! Before whom are you purified, and who purifies you? Your Father in heaven" (Mishnah, Yoma, 8:9).

The Ahaba Rabba (Great Love) prayer, which formed part of the morning worship in the Jerusalem Temple, began: "With great love hast thou loved us, O Lord, our God, with great and exceedingly great forbearance hast thou ruled over us. Our Father, our King, be gracious to us."

### **The "Thou-petitions" are likewise Jewish in their thought and expression.**

The first two, "Hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come," echo the language of the Jewish prayer, the Kaddish. It begins: "Magnified and hallowed be his great name in the world ... And may he establish his kingdom in your lifetime and in your days ... quickly and soon." The third, "Your will be done," is similar to a prayer of Rabbi Eliezer (about A.D. 100): "Do thy will in heaven above and give peace to those who fear thee below" (Babylonian Talmud, Berakoth, 29b).

### **The "Us-petitions" are also Jewish in their idiom.**

The first, "Give us our bread," is akin to the first benediction of grace at mealtime. "Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, king of the universe, who feedest the whole world with thy goodness...; thou givest food to all flesh.... Through thy goodness food hath never failed us: O may it not fail us for ever and ever." The second, "Forgive us," echoes the Eighteen Benedictions, 6: "Forgive us, our Father, for we have sinned against thee; blot out our transgressions from before thine eyes. Blessed art thou, O Lord, who forgivest much." The accompanying phrase, "as we also have forgiven," reflects the Jewish teaching found in Sirach 28:2: "Forgive the wrong of your neighbor, and then your sins will be forgiven when you pray." The third petition, "Cause us to go not into temptation," is similar to a petition in the Jewish Morning and Evening Prayers. "Cause me to go not into the hands of sin, and not into the hands of transgression, and not into the hands of temptation, and not into the hand of dishonor."

Just as it was a practice of Jewish teachers to reduce the many commandments to one or two (compare Mark 12:28-34), so it was often the case that Jewish teachers would give synopses of the Eighteen Benedictions (Babylonian Talmud, Berakoth, 29a).

The Lord's Prayer seems to be Jesus' synopsis of various Jewish prayers of the time.

If the language of the Lord's Prayer and that of various Jewish prayers is similar, the meaning must be determined from Jesus' overall message. Jesus and the early Christians believed in two ages, the Present Evil Age and the Coming Good Age. The Age to Come would be brought by a decisive intervention of God at the end of history. This shift of the ages would be accompanied by the resurrection from the dead and the last judgment. Before either of these events, there would be a time of great suffering or tribulation. One name given to the Age to Come was the Kingdom of God. It was a ideal state of affairs when Satan would be defeated, sin would be conquered, and death would be no more. Jesus believed that in His ministry, the activity of God that was to bring about the shift of the ages was already taking place. Within this world of thought, the Lord's Prayer must be understood.

### **The "Thou-petitions" are synonymous parallelism.**

They all mean roughly the same thing. "Hallowed be thy name," "Thy kingdom come," and

"Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven," are all petitions for the shift of the ages to take place and for the ideal state of affairs to come about. They constitute a prayer for the final victory of God over the devil, sin, and death. It is possible that they were also understood by the early Christians to be a petition for God's rule in their lives in the here and now.

**The "Us-petitions" participate in the same tension between the ultimate future and the disciples' present.**

"Give us our bread for the morrow" (RSV note to Matt. 6:11) may refer to the gift of manna to be renewed at the shift of the ages. The Jewish rabbi, Joshua (about A.D. 90) said: "He who serves God up to the last day of his death, will satisfy himself with bread, namely the bread of the world to come" (Genesis Rabbah 82). It also refers to the bread necessary for daily life in this world as Luke 11:3 indicates: "Give us day by day." "Forgive us our debts or sins" may very well refer to the ultimate forgiveness of sins on the last day, but it also refers to the continuing forgiveness of the disciples by their Heavenly Father as they, living in this age, continually forgive those indebted to them.

"And cause us to go not into temptation" may refer to protection of the disciples in the final tribulation (as in Rev. 3:10), but it also speaks about being helped to avoid something evil within history where we now live.

In all of the petitions, therefore, there is a tension between the present and the future. All of the petitions can be understood to refer both to the shift of the ages and to the present in which we now find ourselves. This is not surprising, considering the tension between the two in both Jesus' message and the early church's theology. The concern about the shift of the ages in the prayer sets it apart from the Jewish prayers whose language was so similar.

**The Lord's Prayer in the New Testament is a community's prayer:**

"Our Father," "Give us ... our bread," "Forgive us our debts," "as we ... forgive our debtors," "Cause us," "Deliver us." It is the prayer of the community of Jesus' disciples.

**The Lord's Prayer is a prayer of petition.**

It is significant that the Model Prayer for Christians is not praise, thanksgiving, meditation, or contemplation, but petition. It is asking God for something.

This prayer of petition seeks two objects.

**First**, one who prays in this way implores God to act so as to achieve His purpose in the world.

**Second**, one who prays in this manner requests God to meet the physical and spiritual needs of the disciples. It is significant that the petitions come in the order they do: first, God's vindication; then, disciples' satisfaction.

Such a prayer of petition assumes a certain view of God. A God to whom one prays in this way is assumed to be in control; He is able to answer. He is also assumed to be good; He wants to answer. The Father to whom Jesus taught His disciples to pray is One who is both in control and good.