



## Dr. James C. Howell eThe Lord's Prayer

### eTheLord'sPrayer – amen

We speak Hebrew all the time without knowing it. The most frequently used loan word to have made its way across the centuries is the one we use to conclude prayer, the one you might be tempted to utter should you hear ultimate truth unveiled, the one my grandfather would pronounce when the preacher made a superb point: "Amen." The Hebrew 'amen means "It's firm, solid and straight; it's true, we agree, we join hands with this."

Not "I agree" – as in "You are confirming my pet biases about the world." "Amen" responds to truth received, not already domesticated; "Amen" is the reflex of your grandest dream, a fixture in the imagination, what we hope to be, the reality we pursue relentlessly.

Jesus concluded his prayer with an "Amen" – not a period so much as a window, not the end but the beginning, not our assent quite so much as God's gracious embrace of those of us who just prayed as Jesus taught us to pray; we join hands with saints and angels and declare "It's true, God is with us."

What did the book of Revelation call Jesus? "He is the great Amen, the faithful and true witness" (3:14). It is Jesus who showed us God, it is Jesus who will be the fulfillment of every desire, the climax to all of history – and so he is in person the Amen, the Truth, the Confirmation of all that is good and eternal.

And at the end of time, we will relish our place in one great chorus of assent: "Amen, Hallelujah!" (Revelation 19:4). The very last words of the Bible (Revelation 22:20) are a promise from the Jesus who taught us to pray, who fulfills our petitions, who is prayer itself: "'Surely I am coming soon!' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen." We anticipate their song, our eternal place in God's holy host, our ultimate Yes, every time we pray as Jesus taught us to pray, concluding with the simple, eloquent "Amen!"

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### eTheLord'sPrayer – forever

Time is everything – more than money, would trade all you possess to rewind the clock – or to have a few more minutes. Time is surely the most precious gift God gives; and simultaneously, time is the great burden, winding down the drain of our past, growing shorter at a quickening pace, snatched away by sudden losses, or barely endured when misery plagues us.

Jesus had "forever" on his mind. But what is this "forever"? Not the infinite extension of time, which is not all that appealing: the monotony of an endless number of days is not heaven. Frederick Buechner, getting older, wrote, "If somebody a while back had offered me a thousand more years, I would have leapt at it, but at this point I would be inclined to beg off... The eventual end to life seems preferable to the idea of an endless and endlessly redundant extension of it. I wish such faith as I have had been brighter and gladder. I wish I had done more with it. I wish I had been braver and bolder. I wish I had been a saint."

"Forever" is a mysterious gate through which we walk into a totally different experience, richer, no clock ticking at all – as if the fullness of some pregnant moment could linger, as if the most marvelous moment of your life could endure, as if the most treasured memory is real once more, our dreams fully realized... Language fails us when we try to talk about "forever." Whatever we imagine, the reality will be better.

We dare not trivialize "forever." The Bible never promises that you will dwell in some private luxury townhouse with only the people you dig, or that heaven is vapid self-indulgence. Heaven will be the restoration of all relationships, the discovery of kinship with strangers you never knew, and those delighting in the reunion will have one agenda item:

praising God, delighting in the direct presence of God. The major frustration of this life – that if we sense God at all it is only “through a glass darkly” – will be no more; we will see God (and each other for the first time!) “face to face” (1 Corinthians 13:10).

To pray “forever” reminds us to bank on what will be around a long time from now, not the transient, the money, things and titillations that will slip into nothingness. “Forever” reminds me of what John Wesley taught us: “I am a spirit come from God and returning to God; just hovering over the great gulf, till a few moments hence I am no more seen – I drop into an unchangeable eternity! I want to know one thing, the way to heaven – how to land safe on that happy shore. God himself has condescended to teach the way: for this very end he came from heaven.”

How good of Jesus to teach us to pray “forever,” to fix in our minds the final destination of our winding journey through this world.

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### **eTheLord’sPrayer – and the glory**

I have loved James Weldon Johnson’s poem, which begins: “The glory of the day was in her face, the beauty of the night was in her eyes, and over all her loveliness, the grace of Morning blushing in the early skies.” Somehow, if we could learn to talk this way, to notice “glory,” to “glorify” instead of “getting glory,” we would love each other more tenderly and understand God more intimately.

The biblical words translated “glory” have multiple connotations: brightness, splendor, truth, beauty, unfathomable greatness, sheer wonder. For biblical people, the undiluted presence of God was so stupendous it would overwhelm; you could never take it in.

We praise lesser goods, like a cool car or a neat vacation spot, maybe some jewelry or just the right putter. Jesus taught us to pray “Thine is the glory” – and perhaps we need to learn to praise the one thing truly worthy of praise, to demarcate some time to do nothing at all except let ourselves be absorbed in the glory that is God.

We could think of God as beauty – not something pretty, but higher, nobler, exceeding our comprehension. Every beautiful thing in this world is a shimmering reflection of the ineffable beauty of God – and so we appreciate each thing more deeply. We live in the refracted light of God’s glory, and our destiny, our reason for being, is quite simply to glorify God, to say “You, Lord, are marvelous, beautiful, gracious, powerful, wise, mind-boggling, all love, eternal, enfolding the universe, embracing me and all people and creatures...” – and we touch on the delights of being “lost in wonder, love and praise” (as Charles Wesley suggested our response to “love divine, all loves excelling” can be).

God exists for God’s own glory; at the end of the day, God will be glorified, and our immense pleasure resides in the humbling, fantastic truth that God will gather us to God’s own heart, and we “glorify him and he will glorify us” (2 Thessalonians 1:12). In the meantime we avert our gaze from ourselves, and toward God: “Thine is the glory.”

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### **eTheLord’sPrayer – and the power**

We may conceive of power as sheer force, or the right connections. But Jesus kept his listeners off balance by turning the meaning of words and concepts inside out, upside down – including “power.”

“Thine is the power” is not some admission that God is really big and can hurl down thunderbolts or overwhelm even the mighty with force. The Greek word used here for “power” is *dunamis*, kin to our word “dynamic.” “Dynamic” implies interaction, a process, something alive that also gives life.

When the disciples were squabbling about who would get to sit at his right hand in glory, a disappointed Jesus explained: “You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you; whoever would be great among you must be your

servant, whoever would be first among you must be slave of all” (Mark 10:42). Jesus wielded the power of a towel and basin as he washed the disciples’ feet; he exhibited the power of heaven itself by passively dying on the cross. Jesus was humble, preferring the lowly place, a manger not a palace, a donkey not a warhorse.

“Thine is the power.” We stand in awe of God’s power – and we are invited to imitate him, to share in his dynamic energy, to wield the very power of God. Paul explained: “Have this mind among you, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant... He humbled himself, obedient unto death. Therefore God has highly exalted him” (Philippians 2:5).

When we empty ourselves, when we serve, and humble ourselves, God highly exalts us with him. To pray “Thine is the power” is a declaration of the startling wonder of God’s tender might, God’s powerful love – and a joining of ourselves to him in his display of true power.

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### **eTheLord’sPrayer – for thine is the kingdom**

The oldest manuscripts of Matthew do not have this hymn-like flourish at the end: “for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, forever. Amen.” Perhaps Jesus stopped with the prayers for forgiveness – although prayers in those days commonly ended with flourishes of praise, and we would be surprised if Jesus had not brought his simple prayer to a climax in which God was extolled.

“Thine is the kingdom”? We build our little fiefdoms, we arrange world; we really wish God would give us some aid in our life projects we’ve undertaken. But then our prayer isn’t “Thine is the kingdom,” but “Mine is the kingdom.” The kingdom is the Lord’s; we have the immense pleasure of serving as subjects in his realm – or better, as friends of the master, or children in the royal family.

Sometimes, to assume citizenship in God’s kingdom, to find our place at God’s table instead of merely our own, we have some work to do. Marianne Williamson suggested that often we invite God into our life the way we might invite an interior decorator into the house, asking for a little sprucing up, some pretty additions. But then we look out the window one day, and there’s a wrecking ball, swinging toward the house – as if the whole thing is shot, right down to the foundations, and we have to start over.

Prayer isn’t a machine that helps us get God to do some stuff we want but can’t get done by ourselves. Prayer is a pledge of allegiance, an oath of fealty, a signup sheet to work together on God’s projects. For “Thine is the kingdom.”

Jesus said “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36) – but he did not mean to imply that his kingdom is otherworldly, or invisible. Jesus’ kingdom is tangible, it happens not just in the future but today, as the hungry are fed, as the wretched are embraced, as cynicism is shed and replaced by a buoyant hope. Jesus’ kingdom is not of this world; it is not dominated by what is cool or chic or shiny. Jesus’ kingdom is all humility, all love, all justice, all goodness.

“Thine is the kingdom” is the logical conclusion to what Jesus taught us to pray a bit earlier: “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” We anticipate that day when heaven and earth will become one, and God will be glorified everywhere, by everybody, singing “Thine is the kingdom.”

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### **eTheLord’sPrayer – but deliver us from evil**

Some translations of the Bible read “Deliver us from the evil one.” The Greek is ambiguous; the noun might be masculine, but might be neuter. Is it “evil” in the abstract? Or “the evil one”?

The grammatical difficulty is identical to our experience: evil sometimes feels vague and numbingly impersonal; but more often it feels quite personal, with plenty of emotion fueling the flames. Jesus was sorely tempted, but he was delivered; in fact, because he was delivered by the powerful mercy of God, he now is our deliverance. One of our hymns admonishes us: "Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face, and the things of earth will go strangely dim." Wage battle with the lure of evil directly and you will be overwhelmed; but focus instead on Jesus, look to him, and you will be delivered.

In English at least, "delivered" is the perfect word! What gets "delivered"? The mail: the mailman shows up through rain, sleet or snow – and God's deliverance is as reliable, as constant, always bearing Good News.

What else gets "delivered"? A baby. Childbirth is agonizing, painful, with tears, desperate cries, moments of fear – but then another cry, it's messy, but new life dawns. God delivered us when a baby was born, when Jesus came not to overpower but to love, humbly. How foolish of God to cope with evil by using a small, vulnerable infant! But by some spiritual jiu-jitsu, evil vaunts itself, but overplays its superficial advantage, as the sheer goodness of life, the tender intimacy of mother and child, is the candlelight that banishes all darkness.

Jesus knew he came, not only to be born, but to die, to offer himself up for us, to engage in mortal combat against evil, the evil one, all that is not of God. His victory was decisive: the victory of love, grace, forgiveness – although the final completion of his victory will not be evident until the end of time. His very Hebrew name, yeshua, means "Lord, help!" but also "The Lord delivers." Jesus, who taught us to pray, is himself our cry for help, and the deliverance we seek when we pray.

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### **eTheLord'sPrayer – lead us not into temptation**

Why ask God not to lead us into temptation, since temptation doesn't seem like the sort of thing God would lure you into? The brother of our Lord wrote that "The Lord tempts no one" (James 1:13). And yet, it was the Spirit of God that led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted (Matthew 4:1).

Life in this world is riddled with temptation, with tests. Does the Lord test us? In a way, our entire mortal existence is a huge test. We know we'll never make an A+, and we likely will stumble and fall. We are "prone to wander"; all sin and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23).

And yet we want to grow, to stretch; John Wesley urged us to be "going on to perfection." To anyone who questions the possibility, we might reply, "If you aren't going on to perfection, where exactly are you heading?"

Theologians throughout history have reflected on "Lead us not into temptation," and they have made two wise suggestions. (1) There are two kinds of tests. One is the difficult but understandable challenge to learn, to be loyal to God in a chaotic world. But the other is our own waywardness, when we insert ourselves into sticky situations, risking proximity to moral peril. We pray that God empowers us to avoid the latter.

(2) ...and to endure the former. We pray that God will assist us not to succumb to the seductions of evil. Paul reassured the young Christians in Corinth, who were buffeted with endless lures and entanglements: "God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape" (1 Corinthians 10:13).

The key verb in the prayer is "Lead." The more serious we become about following Christ, the more we let every decision, the expenditure of our time or money, be in sync with God's leading, and not our own craving, then we pass one test after another; temptation rears its head and we flee for the exits – or our hearts are transformed and we are not even tempted by what used to be powerfully alluring.

Jesus, who taught us to pray "Lead us not into temptation," was severely tempted by the devil. When we are tempted, we look to him; we solicit his power to let the urge subside, and we plead for mercy when we inevitably stumble. Having prayed not to wind up in a zone that might poison the soul, we follow the Lord some place else. "Lead us not

into temptation; lead us to the haven of your heart – and on toward the ever-elusive perfection.

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### **eTheLord'sPrayer – as we forgive those who trespass against us**

I cannot think of anything more harrowing than the prospect that we are forgiven in the measure that we forgive others. If God forgives me only to the degree to which I forgive, then I may as well run up the white flag of surrender.

We get even, we harbor grudges, we just get in a snit and don't speak, or we sanctimoniously smile at someone while nurturing barbs of memory. Frederick Buechner was right: "To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back - in many ways, it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the end of the feast is you."

Jesus said "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy" (Matthew 5:7). It's reflexive! As I wrote in my book on the Beatitudes, "The reward of mercy is... mercy. Mercy has evaporated from the landscape of our culture, leaving us dry, crusty, hardened. We are a permissive people, but then we show no mercy. Our inability to show mercy wars against our ability to receive mercy – which wars against our ability to be merciful... and so the cold, steely circle is forged."

"Mercy is not doing nothing. Mercy is when I unscrew the lid on what is precious to me and pour it out on you. I may not think I have all that much to pour out, but the merciful pour anyway, thinking only of the wounded one who needs the healing balm of mercy. The merciful are far less interested in their own honor than in mercy; their only honor is mercy. The merciful do not get tangled in a thicket of who deserves what, or calculations of whether their mercy will be productive or not. The merciful are merciful because they have received mercy from the same Jesus who said 'Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.'"

...and from the same Jesus who taught us to pray "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Knowing our massive need for forgiveness, we have no recourse but to be forgiving to others, and then the centrifugal force of forgiving and being forgiven hurls us out of the curved in, constricted life of judgment and guilt into the fullness of the heart of God, into a life of joy, one that hardly notices the shortcomings of others any longer, so obsessed are we with the mercy and wonder of God.

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### **eTheLord'sPrayer – forgive us our trespasses**

Whose version of the Lord's prayer is right? The Methodists ("forgive us our trespasses")? or our Presbyterian friends ("forgive us our debts")? Both! We "trespass," we tiptoe (or leap headlong) across the merciful boundaries set for us by God; we refuse God's will, we violate God's requirements – and therefore we find ourselves to be "debtors," we owe what we oddly enough can never pay.

I find when I speak or write on forgiveness, people are keenly interested – and confused. We've been led to believe that if I forgive, I have warm fuzzy feelings toward the person who hurt me. But forgiveness means a decision not to cling forever to the wrong done; forgiveness means to let it go, to let God take it, and move forward without its weight crushing us any longer. Warm fuzzy feelings may result, but they are hardly necessary – or even desirable, given the hurts some of us have endured. Forgiveness, the long labor of reconciliation, truth-telling, showing mercy, letting a relationship be healed, is hard work, and generally impossible without the power and tender mercy of God.

We are intrigued about forgiveness – but I suspect we are thinking primarily of forgiveness between people. Surveys show that even devout people in our day do not grieve so heavily over their sin; oh yes, we're sure we've committed a few peccadilloes, but surely God's in the business of overlooking such minor missteps! We forget that even our piety can be perverse, that a creepy self-righteousness possesses the soul – and is God really grading on the curve? Is

God so pleased by our niceness, our avoidance of lawbreaking? Doesn't God require a life of holiness, a pure heart, sacrificial giving for others, diligent prayer? We have grieved God's heart – and God's grief is all the worse because we blandly find ourselves to be relatively pleasing to God and do not realize how far we have strayed from God's good will for us.

The only way to diagnose the sin in our hearts is to know God, to understand God's ways, to expose ourselves to the Scriptures and the saints – and to pray "Forgive us our trespasses" (and "Forgive us our debts"). They are many, they are embarrassing to acknowledge – but we are not alone. In his immense mercy, Jesus did not teach us to pray "Forgive me my sins" but rather "Forgive us our sins." We are in a mess, but we are in it together; God doesn't pile on by isolating me in my selfish revolt against God. The company we keep is large – and it is the company of believers that we find hope to extricate ourselves from our sin, to stop hurting each other and God.

But it's a prayer, not a New Year's resolution – not "I shall stop trespassing!" but "Forgive us our trespasses." A miracle, the impossible grace of God is the only medicine that can heal us... but then Jesus supplies a startling twist to this prayer for the gift of mercy, as we will see in our next email.

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## **eTheLord'sPrayer – give us this day our daily bread (part 2)**

Why did Jesus call our bread we ask for "daily" bread? Jesus spoke in Aramaic, so it's already a bit lost in translation when we get to the Greek Gospel... Matthew uses the word *epiousios*, "daily." It seems *epiousios* bears many connotations. It can mean "necessary": give us the bread we need – not everything we crave or have a hankering for, but just what we need. It could mean simply "daily," and to people who wondered every day whether they would have anything to eat or not, the dream that God would provide bread "daily" was significant.

Jesus may have had some Bible passages in mind – familiar to his disciples, and maybe to us. "Daily bread" evokes the story of the manna God provided the Israelites in the wilderness (Exodus 16). Bread rained down from heaven – but you couldn't store it up for the future (just in case God took a vacation or let us down). Only enough for a day was out there, and if you saved up the bread went sour. God's grace is like that: you peek out every morning and renew your relationship with God.

Jesus fed people. In John 6, he put food in the mouths of 5,000 people, who were giddy with delight until Jesus shifted into a strong sermon about "You shall not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." Many of the 5,000 drifted away. Those who stayed were even more chagrined when he stopped talking about "bread" as food or even "bread" as God's Word and began to speak of suffering and death: "The bread I give for the life of the world is my body." But Jesus is the "bread of life"; Mary placed him in a manger, which was a feeding trough for animals. Give us our daily bread? Give us your own self, O Lord.

That Greek word *epiousios* might even suggest Jesus was thinking of the heavenly banquet, that great day after time is no more when we feast forever with our Lord and with each other. When we pray the Lord's prayer, we cast our gaze beyond our small world and history itself, and yearn for the day when we will see God face to face (1 Corinthians 13:12), and there will be no hunger (Revelation 7:16).

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## **eTheLord'sPrayer – give us this day our daily bread**

Am I not supposed to earn my bread? Give us bread? We see those who loaf around and wish they could learn the proud pleasures of eat the product of our labor.

Jesus taught his prayer to people who worked far harder than you or I ever have or will. If backbreaking toil, battling the elements, with no technological assistance, and sheer physical effort count for anything, the people who saw Jesus face to face had good cause to look at their bread and declare "I earned my bread." But they fell on their knees

in gratitude to God, and saw the bread, the rain, the fertile soil, the luck of no bad weather, just being alive to break a loaf with a loved one as a lovely gift from God.

Give us our bread. We high achieving Americans who value independence have a heroic spiritual challenge, always: to learn dependence. “Every good and perfect gift comes from the Father of lights” (James 1:17). Every good thing in your life is from God; and think how fortunate you are that others have been kind to you, have loved you, been patient with you. Contemplate the immense grace of God, and how you didn’t ask to be born or to draw the breath you just took for granted a second ago... We say the blessing at mealtime. God didn’t float the food down to you on a plate; but the gratitude is broad if we think of the hands that prepared the food, the grocer, the truck driver, the processor, the farmer, the fertile soil, the rain... Wow, I have more to be thankful for than I’d imagined.

We have a choice, don’t we? To pray humbly, “Give us this day our daily bread,” or to say “I earned my bread” (or even worse to demand it: “Gimme my bread!”). The first is joy, the second a crusty hollowness. It’s “our” bread we ask for anyway. Give “us” this day “our” daily bread. If it’s “our” bread, but really God’s bread to be given, then perhaps we don’t gorge ourselves on so much, and we figure out how to share our food with people who don’t have any. How could we pray “Give us this day our daily bread” and not become generous distributors of bread to the hungry? Jesus, who taught us to pray in this way, said “When you have a dinner, don’t invite those who can invite you in return, but invite the poor who cannot repay you” (Luke 14). If the bread is God’s, and when we ask it becomes “ours,” then what and with whom we eat become matters of divine importance, don’t they?

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### **eTheLord’sPrayer – on earth as it is in heaven**

Martin Luther King, Jr., on the night before he was assassinated, declared “It’s all right to talk about ‘long white robes over yonder,’ in all of its symbolism. But ultimately people want some suits and dresses and shoes to wear down here. It’s all right to talk about ‘streets flowing with milk and honey,’ but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here, and his children who can’t eat three square meals a day. It’s all right to talk about the new Jerusalem, but one day, God’s preacher must talk about the New York, the new Atlanta, the new Philadelphia, the new Los Angeles, the new Memphis.”

To pray “thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” implies there might be some gulf, some unrealized wonders of heaven that we want God to help us make happen down here. What is heaven like? Once we get past trivial, self-serving notions of heaven – imagining the place as some grand resort, birdies on every hole, gorging ourselves on éclairs without gaining an ounce, laughing it up with old fraternity pals, or a giant shopping mall where you have a credit card with no limit (as Tammy Faye Baker Messner put it just before she died) – we think more soberly and wisely and boldly about what heaven surely will be. “They shall hunger no more, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (Revelation 7:16). “I will write my law on their hearts” (Jeremiah 31:33). “The wolf shall dwell with the lamb; they shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain” (Isaiah 11:6). “He raises the poor from the dust, to make them sit with princes” (Psalm 113:7). “He delivers the needy when he calls” (Psalm 72:12). “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:4).

If there are no sections in heaven, if there is no money in heaven, if skin color or superficial appearances vanish in heaven, if nationality will cease to exist, if the haves and have-nots all become mind-boggling haves, then why do we let these distinctions linger here once we have prayed “thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”? If some state of affairs wouldn’t last five seconds in heaven, why do we tolerate it now? If something is too silly for the angels to occupy themselves with, why do we spend so much time on it now?

Jesus’ prayer is a window through which we let our imaginations be set on fire with the bright light of God’s ultimate future, which (unless Jesus was just kidding) has every good chance to take on reality now.

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### **eTheLord’sPrayer – thy will be done**

We so easily get ourselves mixed up about God. We fantasize that prayer is some kind of machine we use to get God to do stuff we request. We oversimplify the universe and mindlessly mutter that “God is in control of everything,” that God’s will equals whatever happens – forgetting that there is such a thing as sin, which by definition is revolt against God’s will, our failure to do God’s will. God could have tied strings to our heads and arms and manipulated us like marionettes; but God loved us instead, and love can’t and doesn’t even want to control. Love’s heart gets broken.

Just ask the God Jesus intimately called “Father,” Abba. Jesus taught the disciples to begin prayer with “Our Father.” But on the darkest hour of his life, his friends who should have been in prayer with him saying “Our” were lurking fearfully in the shadows or drifting off for a nap. Quite alone, Jesus for the hundred thousandth time, address God as “Father,” Abba – and he made a request any father would weep to hear. “Let this cup pass from me” (Luke 22:42). Jesus did not wish to die; the agony of such a gruesome, painful, shameful crucifixion made him shudder, to the point that his perspiration “became like great drops of blood falling on the ground” (Luke 22:44).

But Jesus did not stop with what he preferred; as he has done since he was young, he continued: “Nevertheless, not my will, but you will be done.” His security, his desire, his health, his very life: nothing blocked him from offering himself totally to God. Notice there is no slight hint of resignation in his voice. “God’s will” isn’t some blind fate, some steely decree from the heavens. Jesus could have hidden, he could have run; but he stayed, he waited, he didn’t hurl his captors into a ravine. He actively embraced his vocation; “he loved them to the end” (John 13:1), his love for the unlovable, his refusal to knuckle under to the powers that be – Jesus never quit, Jesus didn’t shrink from the task. He came to love, to serve, to save – and to teach us about the fulfillment of God’s will.

We pray “Thy will be done.” We tremble in grief when we watch the news or look in the mirror and realize how shattered God’s heart must be. Far from being complacent, we pray for the righting of all wrongs, for food for the hungry, for shelter for the homeless, for healing in our own hearts and relationships – and when we pray “thy will be done,” we stand before God, salute, and announce “Reporting for duty.”

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## **eTheLord’sPrayer – thy kingdom come**

Jesus proved to be a bitter disappointment to those who thought he should wield his remarkable powers to overthrow the kingdoms of this world. Born during the impressive reign of Caesar Augustus, Jesus’ birth was heralded only to poor shepherds and merited no mention in Roman records. During the subsequent rule of Tiberius, Jesus was a casualty of Rome’s determination to keep peace even in the remote outskirts of the empire. Jesus not only failed to seize the throne; he was nothing more than one more item on the morning docket for Pontius Pilate, a mid-level, cruel bureaucrat whose career went nowhere – but Caesar’s kingdom was rid of Jesus.

“My kingdom is not of this world,” Jesus explained to a puzzled Pilate (John 18:36). Jesus inaugurated a totally new kind of kingdom, where true power is generous love, where the palace is a manger, whose marching regiments are ragtag fishermen and shepherds, where a show of force is a head bowed in prayer, where the honored guests are previously shunned lepers, whose Lord forgives his enemies and embraces the despised.

We could give some abstract, theological definition of what Jesus meant by his “kingdom” – but we need look no further than his own words. The kingdom is like a reckless sower flinging seed all over the place, or like a vineyard owner who pays the guys who worked one hour the same as those who labored all day (Mark 4:3, Matthew 20:1). The kingdom is a father running breathlessly to swoop up his wayward son returned home, or like a tiny seed growing into a vast tree for birds to nest in (Luke 15:11, Matthew 13:31). The kingdom is like any little child, or a lender simply refusing to collect a huge sum owed him (Matthew 18:4, 23). The kingdom is like yeast making the bread rise, or a woman finding a coin she’d misplaced (Luke 13:21, 15:8). The kingdom is God throwing a party for people stunned they’ve been invited; the kingdom is justice, always and everywhere; the kingdom is healing, the end of all tears. The kingdom Jesus prays for is nothing less than Jesus himself.

Jesus prays for the kingdom to come, implying it’s not here just yet. Or is it? “The kingdom is within (or among) you” (Luke 17:21). It’s here, it’s not here yet; we pray for its dawning, we scan the horizon for any sign of something that looks like Jesus, certain that eventually everything, everyone will mirror his glory. God’s kingdom is the wave of the

future, it's the one sure thing on which we bet everything.

For now, we pray for it without ceasing, and work for its fruition; when necessary we stay out of the way so it can manifest itself in spite of us. As Aldous Huxley shrewdly wrote, "'Thy kingdom come' always means 'My kingdom go.'" I remove any fake crown from my own head, placed there when I thought I would master my own existence, and I bow before the only true king – although it's hard to get lower than king Jesus, since his head is bowed and he's sporting a towel in hopes of washing my feet.

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## **eTheLord'sPrayer – hallowed be thy name**

The word "hallowed" has fallen into disuse; but more importantly, we are not people who do much "hallowing" of anything at all. Everything is for sale; almost anything can be made trashy in our culture. The virgin Mary is mocked by a rock singer dubbing herself as "Madonna," the American flag appears on bikinis, and the cross may be tattooed on a gang member's shoulder.

How will we "hallow" or "revere" God's name in such a marsh of triviality and crudeness? What would "hallowed" or "reverence" be? The philosopher [Susan Neiman](#) has written that "Reverence is what you feel when you feel overpowered, struck dumb by the realization that some things are beyond human grasp... You know you're in the grip is something vaster than you are. It's an experience not simply of pleasure but of silent celebration. These feelings enlarge us, and make us better than before."

To "hallow," to "revere," is even different from another virtue: "respect," which is "something you should feel for yourself along with others; reverence is the feeling you have for something none of us will ever reach" (as Neiman put it).

To "get" reverence, to hallow the name, silence is essential; we have to "be still and know that I am God" ([Psalm 46:8](#)). Our day of rest, the Sabbath, is a feast of time in which we simply reflect on and delight in God's very name. In Old Testament days, God's name – so sacred it was only very rarely uttered – was Yahweh, meaning something like "I am" or "I cause things to be" or even better, "I will be." What a perfect name for God, and we could spend a life time being struck dumb by such a God in whose grip we find ourselves.

Jesus' name is stunning as well: yeshua in Hebrew means "God help!" Jesus is humanity's cry for divine aid, and Jesus is simultaneously the answer, the solution to our cry for help. "There is a name I love to hear... Jesus, Jesus, sweetest name I know" (as the old hymns sang it), a cause for silent celebration, enlarging us, making us better.

Tragically, God's name is invoked in manipulative ways, tossed around trivially, as talk of God spews all over the place, perhaps especially by politicians trying to garner votes – forgetting the commandment, "Thou shalt not take the Lord's name in vain" (Exodus 20:7). There is such a thing as blasphemy, the inappropriate, crass misuse of God's name.

And so with redoubled earnestness we pray, "Hallowed be thy name," and we trust the name's future glory: "at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, in heaven and on earth, and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:10).

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## **eTheLord'sPrayer – in heaven**

Children may think of heaven as some immense, glittering city banked somewhere far above the clouds, a happy place up very high where grandma or Rover lives on after death. Adults realize heaven cannot be plotted on any astronomical chart, and they either become cynical about the very notion of heaven, or think of it as merely symbolic, or else they believe in its reality as something so mind-boggling as to defy measurement or explanation.

If “our Father” is in such a place, then doesn’t the reality of God feel remote, opaque, so distant that we are totally befuddled or stuck feeling we’re on our own? When Jesus prayed to God the Father “in heaven,” he was speaking reverently, with awe, recognizing God isn’t a hip-pocket God who exists for me, but a God unfathomably magnificent, powerful, responsible for whole solar systems and galaxies – and so we resist the temptation to shrink God down to our size. We are not the center of things (as the smartest people on earth thought for centuries) with heaven hovering above or around us, the center. We are part of something much larger; we are not at the center at all. God is the epicenter of everything; the axis around which the entire universe revolves is – heaven.

Heaven is where God is supposed to be. Many old-timey pocket watches have these words inscribed: “God’s in his heaven, all’s right with the world” – but not really. God’s in heaven, but we’re lost, confused, sinful, mortal down here. We need God. We need to understand that this place, lovely as it may be, as full of joys as our world might be, is not our ultimate destination. “Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior” (Philippians 3:20). Like a helicopter swooping in to pick up soldiers from the field and return them to their homes, like a homeless child leaving life under a bridge to live in a Church-sponsored home, the Jesus who prayed the Lord’s prayer will come from this mind-boggling heaven to retrieve us – as he promised: “Let not your hearts be troubled. In my Father’s house are many rooms... I go to prepare a place for you, and I will come against and take you to myself, that where I am you may be also” (John 14).

The secret hidden in the Lord’s prayer is when we learn to desire this above all else: to be with Jesus, and his Father in heaven. In [my book](#) on the Apostles’ Creed, I suggested that we should be glad God is “maker of heaven and earth,” that God did not stop when earth was made, but God kept going and made heaven, not an infinitely long, almost boring continuation of life as we’ve known it, but true glory, sheer delight, when we no longer “see through a glass darkly” but “face to face” (1 Corinthians 13:12). When we pray “Our Father, who art in heaven,” we catch a glimpse of God’s face, we overhear a quiet echo of the chorus of God’s saints and angels, we yearn for our only true home.

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## **eTheLord’sPrayer – Our Father**

So if God is Father, if God is Abba, then we rewind to remind ourselves Jesus didn’t pray “My Father...” but “Our Father.” If God is our Father, then we the children find ourselves in a family.

Tolstoy’s first sentence in Anna Karenina was “Happy families are all alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” We need not look far to find a “dysfunctional” family; we find ourselves related to the strangest people. It’s prickly, exasperating, lovely yes, but bewildering – and God calls us into a family? No wonder Church is annoying; you have to hang in there with people you may not have chosen, you have to love people despite their foibles, you have to work out issues. Church is a beautiful school, built by God, in which we learn to stick with what we’re stuck with.

Or so it is for those who know God as “our Father,” instead of the trifling kind of spirituality that doesn’t tangle with anybody else, a solo faith that only knows “my Father.” Didn’t the father in Jesus’ best story urge the brother who preferred to go it alone to come in to the party to celebrate the homecoming of the wayward brother (Luke 15)? We only meet and become intimate with the Father to whom Jesus prayed when we lock arms with others – not because we like them or we live in the same neighborhood, but because we are God’s lost, loved children.

We wish we could patch up families and strengthen them – but then Jesus, oddly, suggests allegiance to God may

divide a family! In Conversations with St. Francis, I devoted an entire chapter to the grievous division in Francis's family over his decision for Christ – that dramatic moment captured in fresco when Francis said, "Until now I have called Pietro Bernardone my father. But, because I have proposed to serve God, I return to him his money, and his clothing, and from now on I will say 'Our Father, who art in heaven.'"

To call God "Father" is a decision, an oath of loyalty. Families that care little about God may be in for a rude awakening if one or more in the family get serious about God. Didn't Jesus say, "I have come to set a man against his father... He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me" (Matthew 10:35)?

But we are never orphaned. God extends wide, tender arms to embrace us in a new family. When told his family had shown up, Jesus asked, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers? Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, sister, and mother" (Matthew 12:48-50).

Yes, there is friction in the family of God, in every Church family. But friction creates sparks that can ignite; friction polishes, so we might mirror the love of God to those not yet drawn into the family of God. Then, together, we discover the joy expressed by St. Francis: "O how holy and how loving, gratifying, humbling, peace-giving, sweet, and desirable it is for us together to have such a Brother: our Lord Jesus Christ."

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## **eTheLord'sPrayer – Father**

In the Apostles' Creed, we say we believe in God the Father Almighty. Jesus invites us, if we believe, or even if we do not yet believe, actually to speak to God the Father. Gender issues might derail our prayer; but after we've intellectually sorted through the fact that God isn't male, and even that images of a particular earthly father might get us in a false tangle about God, we return to pray "Our Father."

We do not call God "Father" because it's the best conceivable picture of what God is like. "Mother" might serve just as well. Anna Quindlen's novel, *One True Thing*, tells of a daughter who left her career to care for her dying mother. When asked, "Did you love your mother?" she replied, "The easy answer is yes. But it's too easy just to say that when you're talking about your mother. It's so much more than love – it's everything, isn't it? When someone asks you where you come from, the answer is your mother. When your mother's gone, you've lost your past. Even when there's no love, it's so much more than anything else in your life. I did love my mother, but I didn't know how much until she was gone." Later she realized that "we had so misunderstood her, this woman who had made us who we were while we barely noticed it... And being so wrong about her makes me wonder now how often I am utterly wrong about myself."

God the Father is everything, God is where we come from. We misunderstand the Father, and thus we misunderstand ourselves. We pray "Our Father" because Jesus prayed "Our Father" – and when he prayed in his native tongue, Aramaic, he addressed God as "Abba," an intimate term meaning "Daddy," although not only little children but grown men referred tenderly to their fathers as "Abba." This God, our Father, Abba, beckons us to climb into his lap and settle in for some time, some comfort, some tears. In Bible times, fathers apprenticed their sons in a business like carpentry – and so Jesus would teach us how to live.

...and how to understand ourselves. We are not alone, we are not the arbiters of our own fate; I'm not measured by money or good looks, how cool or popular I might be, or even my health. "When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is the Spirit bearing witness that we are children of God, and if children then heirs, provided we suffer with Christ, so we may be glorified with him" (Romans 8:15).

If we pray to the Father, we must be the children. Humbly, we toddle, we reach for God's hand, we never venture far on our own, we are under no illusion of independence. Whatever we suffer, no matter how sophomorically we squander the gifts, God the Father runs to us and welcomes us home (Luke 15:20). We blush when we consider the staggering magnificence of what God promises to us his beloved children, and we barely restrain deep laughter then as we pray boldly and joyfully, "Our Father."

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## **eTheLord'sPrayer – our**

How pregnant with meaning is the very first word of the Lord's Prayer? "Our." In Luke's version (chapter 11), Jesus begins more simply: "Father" – without the "our." We can't get distracted by questions like "Which one did he really say – Matthew 6:9 or Luke 11:1?" since Jesus prayed often, and taught the prayer many times.

In a way, the breathtaking straightforwardness of Luke's "Father" is theologically appealing, as we might prefer to avoid the troubling idea that prayer begins with us instead of God – and us in a possessive mood! "Our"? We don't need Jesus to help us to say "our." We are consumers, our souls are possessive – but perhaps Jesus is giving us a clue into God's mercy for us who say "our" too often; perhaps we're on our way to healing already.

Then again, how lovely is this little word, "our"? Jesus did not teach us to pray "My father... give me bread... forgive my sin." Immediately, Jesus' prayer draws me out of myself and locates my life in the company of others; faith isn't something I do solo, but with you, and the Church, and even those who want nothing to do with the Church.

Who is this "our"? Could it be that Jesus, who extended his arms on the cross to embrace all of humanity, invites us to pray not only for ourselves but even for those who don't know how to pray, or simply don't pray?

We stand elbow to elbow with spouse, child, friend, fellow Church member, coworkers, folks who live elsewhere, hurricane victims, the poor across town, the enemy, the loved one with whom our relationship has fractured seemingly beyond repair, and we boldly address God together: "Our Father." "Nothing can separate us from the love of God" (Romans 8:39), and the love of God, the miracle of prayer, will settle for no less than this: "Love one another as I have loved you" (John 13:34). "From now on, regard no one from a human point of view; God reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:16).

From now on, we delight in saying "Our." If the bread we ask for is "ours" instead of "mine," then I not only must share it; I would be miserable not sharing. If the sins forgiven are "ours" then forgiveness gets spread around and we make peace. St. Thomas Aquinas said that to pray "our" is to express before God our love of neighbor – so since prayer is really nothing but love, and its fruit is love, then Jesus was wise to teach us to pray, "Our."

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## **eTheLord'sPrayer – when, not if**

When the disciples asked Jesus to reveal his secrets to real prayer, he began his next couple of sentences with "When you pray..." (Matthew 6:5, 7; Luke 11:2). Not if, but when! He assumed we would pray as all Jews did: three times daily (in addition to mealtime blessings), clocking in with God no matter what else might be going on. Wherever he was, wherever his disciples were, at the appointed hour they would put down their work, turn toward Jerusalem, and pray – standing.

Jews generally prayed standing, although they were known to bow or kneel in times of great trouble – reminding me of the lovely thought by Isaac Bashevis Singer: "I only pray when I am trouble; but then I am in trouble all the time."

We are in trouble all the time! But there is help; we are not alone. Jesus not only taught us to pray, but himself ushers us into the presence of God. "We have not a high priest unable to sympathize with our weaknesses... Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:15).

The clear focus of the Lord's prayer is God, not us; we pray most meaningfully when we share our concerns with God but then find ourselves swept up into something larger than ourselves – into the very heart of God. The Lord's prayer begins with God ("Our Father... in heaven... hallowed is Your name... Your kingdom... Your will"), and only later moves to our needs ("Give us bread... forgive us... deliver us"), returning then to the glory of God. So it is God who

envelops us, and we discover the comfort of being enfolded in God's greatness.

Two final thoughts before we explore the Lord's prayer itself. Tertullian, the great second century theologian, suggested we expand upon each phrase in the prayer, adding privately our personal petitions to God. So, "Hallowed be thy name" might inspire us to add "and I am sorry I spoke of you frivolously"; or "As we forgive those who trespass against us" might humble us into adding "Lord, do some surgery on my heart which is reluctant to forgive John Doe."

And then the simplest secret to prayer: I once heard a priest say "The only way to pray is to pray." Batting around ideas about prayer is no substitute for prayer; and the only way to improve, to discover a genuine intimacy with God is actually to pray.

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### **eTheLord'sPrayer – Lord, teach us to pray**

People of faith probably fall into two categories – those who struggle with prayer, and those who seem to converse with God easily. For both, Jesus offered us the extraordinary gift of a model prayer, and he did so because the disciples, who followed him around day after day, and knew him as intimately as we might hope to know God, could not help but notice his stunningly close relationship with God.

They wanted in on a good thing, and so they asked him: "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1). How intriguing: to think of prayer as something to be learned, an act you never master, a relationship that is organic, alive and growing. And the fact that Jesus didn't say "Oh, just pray whatever is on your heart" is revealing: on our own, we might prattle on with nothing more than a wish-list we hope God will fulfill, and then our prayer would be narrow, parochial, more about me than about God, much less the rest of God's people and agenda. So Jesus teaches prayer, Jesus stretches us beyond what we might pray by ourselves; Jesus takes us very close to the heart of God.

But he does so with humbling brevity. "When you pray, do not heap up words," and "Do not be like the hypocrites who love to pray to be seen by others." The quality of prayer is not measured by its eloquence, or by its length. Jesus, to be sure, spent much, much time in prayer, but evidently his words were few. Could it be we do too much of the talking in prayer? As Barbara Brown Taylor put it, instead of talking so much and summing up with "Lord, hear our prayer," we might cultivate some attentive listening, in silence, lingering after the simple plea, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

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