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Spiritual Life - Prayer and Devotional

OUR FATHER IN HEAVEN

By J.H. Sillevs Smitt

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Our Father in Heaven

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Translator's foreword:

This little book on the Lord's Prayer is by far the most beautiful book I know on prayer. It is like a mountain climber's guide, providing a route without detours, and advising a minimum of essential baggage for our walk in faith. It is focussed and never waivers from leading us away from our old self and towards a new beginning in a life of obedience to God.

The original was written sometime in the late 1940's. I have used the 5th edition which I obtained early in the 1960's.

The original work does not give any textual references, nor does it quote Bible texts (other than in the body of the work without any further comments); I have supplied the references and in most cases the text, for easy reference.

I have made surprisingly few "updates" in the translation of the text to accommodate a new age and a new world. The original was distilled to reflect only the inner truths of the message and had not 'aged' appreciably.

Where necessary, I considered the need of the current reader to understand, rather than the exact wording or image that the author used. I have done so for clarity, and trust that the author would have agreed if he had been in a position to give assent.

Those who have access to the original text will find that it is faithfully and completely rendered into contemporary English.

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Going into your Inner Room

Jesus once told his disciples to go into the inner room¹. This small room, in a middle eastern home, could be locked from the inside. One could be alone there, alone with God.

Jesus frequently urged his companions to seek this being-alone-with-God in their lives, to go into their 'inner room'.

We can't truly serve God without silence. If we remain immersed in the rat race of our daily lives we will become completely absorbed by it. One of the greatest enemies of a vibrant spiritual life is the modern claim, too quickly made, "I don't have time." Today, people are afraid of 'wasting time'. But the quickest, most effective way to waste a lot of time is failing to make time for God, and for prayer. Time spent in our 'inner room' pays rich dividends.

I think I know why Jesus urged his friends to find quiet time with God. People seem to fear being alone. The reason for this may be twofold. We are afraid of being by ourselves, and we are afraid of being alone with God. Intuitively we know that we cannot escape from ourselves for long, nor is it easy to hide from God in our 'inner room'. There we are confronted both with our own self, and with our God. Paradoxically, something in us longs for such an encounter but, at the same time, something in our very soul seems to drive us to endless activity in order to avoid it. Therefore Jesus tells us to go into our 'inner room', and if we follow his advice we

¹ Matthew 6:6. - The *Tamieion* of the Greek is translated in the New American Standard Bible as "inner room"; the NIV, NRSV, RSV, have "room"; in the KJV it is "closet"; in the JB: "Private Room"; ASV has "inner chamber"; and The Message has "quiet secluded place". I have followed the NASB here - JVM

will reap rich benefits. We will find and recognize in our deepest self what we all need most, peace of heart.

Our 'inner room' can be an oasis in the desert, and when we meet God we experience a foretaste of heaven on earth. With never-ending astonishment we will proclaim again and again that we did not know God could be so kind so patient, so gracious, so completely satisfying for all our needs. Guilt and fear, restlessness and irritation disappear from the struggling heart. Anyone who finds God, finds life!

But happiness does not come cheap. In our 'inner room' we get to know our true self in the mirror of Jesus' perfection. That can cause some very unpleasant moments. Things we have almost forgotten comes back to haunt us with frightful clarity and painful memory. Things we have pushed out of our memory return to the spotlight of our consciousness.

The 'inner room' has no emergency exit. Once we are caught we cannot escape. Our choice is either to bend or break. That is the place where God's Spirit moves us to surrender to him.

At first we're afraid of radical surrender, only to discover later that in the very surrendering we find our happiness. Our heart does not find true peace, until it finds peace in God.

Something else happens in our 'inner room'. I believe that we are so busy trying to escape our inner self because we are aware of our fear, we know deep down that we desperately need to change, but we really don't want any basic transformation in our lives. But once we are alone with God, and submit to him, change will occur inevitably.

The Bible tells us that it is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.² That is true. But it is equally true that it is

² Hebrews 10:31

wonderful to fall into the hands of the living God. The hands of God are frightfully strong, but they are also delightfully strong. They are not only strong, they are also tender, and with that patient tenderness the Lord's hands clean and bandage the wounds which we receive in the battles of life.

But these same hands of God also bend our stubborn ego to do his bidding. The hardest spots of our soul will be melted through experiencing his love. We may jealously guard from exposure those areas that caused our greatest misery, but by his love they will melt away.

The confrontation with God will cleanse and strengthen us. The intimate relationship with God which can now begin will satisfy and renew us.

Out of the leftovers and pieces of our old cantankerous self, which were about to crumble and disintegrate anyway, the Lord will build us into a new person. We will be happy and thankful that we have finally found peace. Then we will also begin to reflect His image.

Is it 'Natural' to Pray?

Prayer is the breath of the soul. Breath is natural and essential. Try to stop breathing and your system will take over automatically, quite independent of your will.

One of the most beautiful experiences in life is watching a child at prayer. A child prays without reservation, and considers prayer natural and normal. But we, as adults who have become such con artists when it comes to sincerity, face all kinds of problems when we want to pray.

That should not surprise us. When we pray we usually fold our hands and close our eyes. Often we bow our heads or kneel by our bedside. These are all symbolic gestures. To a child these are all natural expressions, but for our ego, our stubborn and haughty

heart, this is less agreeable. Folding our hands expresses begging; bowing our heads represents submission and resignation. To kneel is to admit that we are not masters, but servants, and by closing our eyes we acknowledge that we do not trust ourselves to seek our own fortune.

We grown-ups are often our own worst enemies. We insist on sitting in the driver's seat of our own life. No wonder Jesus said over and over again that we must become like little children in order to enter the Kingdom of Heaven¹.

If we ever expect to amount to anything, it has to be on this premise: that God be God and that we stay human. That *he* be great and we stay humble. That we let *him* be the King, and we the servants. That we let *him* be the Father, and we his children. That *he* be powerful and we weak.

However, as we grow up we often lose the ability to be natural, and guileless. As our ego expands, our prayer life often suffers and can only regain its rightful place when we become childlike and humble before God, folding our hands, bowing our heads, and bending our knees.

One day, possibly early in the morning, the disciples unexpectedly witnessed Jesus praying. They quietly stayed in the background for they sensed that they were standing on holy ground. What they observed was real prayer. Alive, trusting, conquering prayer. Their own prayers were listless and flat whereas, by comparison, Jesus was praying in spirit and in truth. When Jesus returned to them they asked him wisely and reverently, "Lord, teach us to pray".

In response Jesus gave them the words of a prayer that has since then been known as the Lord's Prayer²,

¹ "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven". Matthew 18:3

² Matthew 6:9-13; see also Luke 11: 2-4.

*Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.
[for yours is the kingdom
and the power and the glory,
forever, Amen]¹*

¹ Inserted as a footnote in NIV

The Lord's Prayer

The Great Martyr

The Lord's Prayer occupies an unusual place in the lives of people.

Even people who do not consciously think of religion and are very reluctant to call themselves Christians have a special place of reverence in their heart for the Lord's Prayer. People who know little of the Bible may yet fondly recall this prayer.

I remember that during the second world war, I visited a first mate of a naval ship who had been critically injured and was dying in a military hospital in England. I could only visit him once because I was scheduled to leave for another military hospital the same day. When I saw this man I knew the surgeon's prognosis, that this man would only live a few more hours, was not exaggerated. He was very near to death. I tried to speak to him about his faith but was met with a wave of the hand indicating that he did not want to discuss the subject. He had been in Sunday school as a child but had never cared much for God or religion. I knew I should not tire him out too much, so when I learned that his mother tongue was French I asked him if he could teach me the Lord's Prayer in French. He said, "Gladly, Father" and began, "Notre Père, qui est aux cieux ...". After one more phrase he automatically folded his hands and closed his eyes. He did not recite it any longer, he was praying it, and I prayed silently with him. When he was finished I proposed that he had not just recited it, but that he had actually prayed it. He said he thought so too. The wall around his heart was broken down, his resistance vanished, and the window to heaven stood wide open for him.

There are two ways to say the Lord's Prayer. We can memorize it

by rote and recite it without thought, or we can pray it from our heart.

This prayer is the greatest martyr in the history of the church. It has been terribly abused. It has been reeled off, berated, reviled, criticized, and rejected. But regardless of all the abuse of this prayer the Lord Jesus proclaims that we must worship God in spirit and in truth¹.

The Lord's Prayer was not given us to recite absentmindedly, but to pray from the heart.

If we want to pray this prayer, we must do so wholeheartedly. We must put our soul into it and completely submit ourselves to it.

You may think that you know the Lord's Prayer. I did too, for many years, until I stumbled on a passage from Luther. He once said something like this,

"It often happens when I pray the Lord's Prayer or a church prayer that one of the lines grips me particularly and I experience such a rich train of thought that I forego all other prayers. When such rich reflections come naturally during prayer it is best to stop and listen, and make room for these reflections. Listen quietly and do not interrupt. These are sermons of the Holy Spirit. And one word from his sermons is better than a thousand of our prayers. Thus I often learned more in prayer than I could have learned by reading or writing poetry.

And, as I noted above in my comments on the Lord's Prayer, I wish to emphasize again that should the Holy Spirit come and begin to preach with rich, insightful,

¹See: John 4:23. - In Dutch the word 'worship' contains the word 'prayer' (*Aanbidden* and *bidden*)

light-giving clarity, pay respectful attention. Let go of your own thoughts, which are only personal reflections and meditations. Be still and listen to him who knows much more than you.

Note what he says and write it down. You will experience miracles.”¹

These words of Luther remind me of a peaceful summer afternoon I once spent alone at a friend's cottage. I had planned to prepare my sermon for the following Sunday, and while I was praying to focus my attention on the sermon, the Lord's Prayer presented itself to me in an irresistible way. I spent two or three hours concentrating on each word and phrase of this prayer. After every word I paused and reflected on it. God's Spirit led my thoughts and every word blossomed like a flower. Every word fell like a seed on fertile soil in my heart. Whatever came up as I meditated on the text, I wrote down. When finished it seemed as if I had never before prayed this prayer.

So my advice is that if you wish to learn to pray the Lord's Prayer, take your time. Take lots of time. Go into your 'inner room' and take an hour or two. Say each word slowly in God's presence and deliberately reflect on what God wants you to hear in this word. Let each word within its context guide you. Test each of these words against your own life, and you will learn to understand Luther's words; you too will experience miracles.

Two Questions

I vividly remember that day at the cottage. I felt deeply that I could never again utter one word of the Lord's Prayer until it had found a clear and complete echo in my own soul. I learned to ask two questions of myself for each petition of this prayer.

The first one was: *Can I pray this?*

The second: *Do I want to pray this?*

Throughout our lives there will continue to be a great distance between the words of Jesus and the way we live. We barely penetrate the depth and meaning of his words and will. That is why, even in our most practised and sincere praying of the Lord's Prayer, we will still not have mastered praying this perfect prayer. We need a whole lifetime to begin to learn to pray it in earnest.

That ought not to scare us off. You can make beautiful trips in the mountains without ever climbing to the top.

Therefore, take your time for this prayer. Speak it slowly, one word at the time and do not continue until each previous word sinks into your heart. Do not go on until a new vision or insight enlightens you with complete harmony to the text. Then repeat the two questions: *Can I pray this*, and *do I want to?* You will face unexpected and powerful resistance, unwillingness and impurity of thought in your own heart. That is why praying the Lord's Prayer cleanses the soul. It is a spa for your faith and a mud bath for your soul. You will rekindle your first love and renew your utter dependence with joy and trust.

People often complain that prayer doesn't do anything for them. It doesn't help them to become more spiritual. In my first Bible story book there was a picture of Cain and Abel's offerings before God. The smoke of Cain's offering turned down and the smoke of Abel's offer rose up to God. God was unreachable for Cain and he experienced no communion with him.²

Many people feel that when they pray the smoke of their prayer does not go up. God is unreachable and they have no contact with him. Such a disappointing experience leads them to stop

¹ No reference given - JVM

²Genesis 4: 3-5.

praying altogether. Some of these same people find that Bible reading doesn't touch them either, so they also stop reading the Bible. Then they blame the Bible for being a dark and mysterious book. It doesn't help any more than prayer. Of course this is not true, and it's not useful to think that way. But something else *is* needed. When we don't find God in our 'inner room', but remain totally alone and in the dark or when God appears far away and distant, it could be that the problem is with us. Some self reflection may be needed here. When our prayer life remains dull and dismal, instead of lifting us up and enriching us, it is possible that we might need to look for the reason within ourselves. Maybe I should state it more clearly. Actually, the reason is *always* within *us*. God's love never fails, and his desire to find us and bless us also never wanes. You know what happens when the windshield of your car fogs over. Your vision is completely lost. There's only one reason for this fogging: there is a difference in temperature between the window and the air inside. Turn on the defrost and the window clears up. So also with us. When we fail to find God in our prayers, it is because our soul is clouded over. *God is not far from us, we are far from him*. Something has come between us and God. Not from his side, but from our side. That obstacle has to be removed. But, you say, you may not know what it could be. We are often unaware of the obstacles that have come between us and God in prayer. But when we honestly reflect for only a few moments we will usually know exactly what it is that is askew in our lives and the cause of our separation from God. If you want to gain clarity about the obstacle, just pray the Lord's Prayer. Pray it slowly and conscientiously. Pray each petition testing it against your heart. Think about it and you will find the cause of your shallow prayers. You will discover the resistance of your heart which conflicts with the love and truth of God. God will not condone the inner contradiction in your life. When you

pray the Lord's Prayer you may discover that at a certain point you cannot go on. The next phrase will not come over your lips because it does not have the consent of your heart. It is possible that you stop at *Your will be done or, as we forgive our debtors or, lead us not into temptation*.

The Lord's Prayer is a never-failing tuning fork for our inner life, because every word of the Lord's Prayer is the double distilled, pure, holy, loving Word of God. It is the perfect litmus paper to indicate if we are indeed completely subject to the will and Spirit of Jesus, as given to us in the Lord's Prayer. It is like an X-ray which clearly records the trouble spot of our being. It identifies the invasive tumour which eats us up and destroys us from the inside out in contrast to God's perfect healing love for us.

Structure of the prayer.

The Lord's Prayer cannot be dissected only with our intellect. It has to be approached and understood spiritually. But a spiritual understanding does not exclude our intellect. Rather it embraces it. Religion and science are not opposites of each other but rather they are linked together. We are familiar with the well-known words of Jesus that we must love God with our whole heart and mind and soul¹. We are not split into sections or parts. We are whole persons.

When we reflect on the Lord's Prayer with our intellect, and test it with our spirit, we realize that it has a strong inner coherence.

After the opening words, *Our Father in heaven*, follow two sets of three petitions.

Three petitions relate to God, the other three to us. Three times:

¹Matthew 22:37; Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27.

your, your, your, then three times: *us, us, us*. Then the Lord's Prayer closes with the doxology: *For yours is the kingdom and the power and glory, forever*. One word is noticeably absent. The word 'I' or 'me'.

There is no room for the individual 'me' in this prayer. Or rather there is room for 'me' in this prayer only if 'me' and 'mine' are completely absorbed in the 'yours' and 'us'. This prayer is not for the isolated 'me' who wishes to remain egotistic. Praying this prayer requires that we only say 'your' and 'us'. All self-centeredness and egotism come to an end here and are buried for good.

In the Lord's Prayer the 'I' dies a well deserved death of faith. Those who pray this prayer honestly pray themselves to death. Paul speaks often and fondly of the crucifying and dying of the old self¹. This dying happens inevitably when we begin to pray the Lord's Prayer with our heart and our whole being.

Be careful! If you want to maintain control over your life, and your ego wishes to remain number one, don't pray this prayer! You may be able to quote it and race through it, and lead others in this prayer in public meetings. That probably won't harm you. But if you begin to pray this prayer in spirit and in truth, your ego and prestige, your will and vanity will become critically compromised, and your 'old self' will die.

Our Father in Heaven

Not singular but plural

The first word of the Lord's Prayer not only surprises us, but it also defines us. If it were up to me the 'best' prayers would be done in the first person singular, and 'my' not 'our' would be the operative word. Jesus, however, teaches us that prayer has to be in the plural.

For us prayer is the very essence of personal petitions presented in the most private manner. One can't easily bring others into it. It is such an intimate activity that some of us experience a considerable awkwardness when a casual acquaintance catches us in the act of praying. Many people consider a prayer that is not personal and private to be less sincere or powerful.

Jesus, however, places prayer in our midst with the word *our*. From the very first word we are lifted above individual selves. Intimacy is good, but it can so easily become individualistic and exclusive. The secret of true prayer is that it releases me from my own 'self' and lifts me up. It breaks through the egotism that is in my heart and places me above it.

Note how very self-serving we usually are in our prayers. We pray for *my* health and *my* sins, *my* worries and *my* troubles, *my* sorrow and *my* weaknesses. In addition to that our prayer becomes a wish list for more and still more.

Jesus cuts through this vicious circle of our egotism and it's companion, loneliness, with the very first word of the Lord's Prayer. These words, *Our Father*, bridge the gap to our neighbours and to God. A person, especially in prayer, is never alone, doesn't need to be alone and, indeed, should never be alone. I am never just an individual. I am always a part of a whole, a member of *one* body by belonging to a community of

¹See Romans 6:6 and 7:6; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians. 4:22; Colossians. 3:9.

faith.

Furthermore, we are in our heart of hearts incurable misers and spiritual skinflints. We look after number one first and foremost. Do you know what keeps many unchurched people from joining the church? It is because so many believers act as if they have God in their pocket. As if they owned him. But no person nor group can claim ownership of God. He is not just *my* God, nor is he just *your* God. He is *our* God. He is also *our* Father and therefore we are his children, and so brothers and sisters together. God is not in the East nor in the West. He is everywhere, God of all.

The history of the church, throughout the ages, has shown again and again that Christians have a tendency to claim God only for themselves. But God cannot be claimed. It is he who claims *us*, all of us. God and religion are not private issues. God not only loves you or me but “God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son”¹ for this whole world.

We sometimes think that spiritual individualism makes us rich and strong, but that is incorrect. People cannot live without God, nor can they live without each other.

If we speak the word 'our' honestly and with conviction, we receive heretofore unknown spiritual wealth. There is nothing worse than to be totally alone, but we are never completely alone. Some might be under the impression that they are worse off than others, or that no one could know their loneliness and pain, or that no one else has committed such wicked deeds.

With this one little word *our* Jesus teaches us that we are never alone. There are many people like us who are in the same boat. There are no questions that have not been asked by others, nor is there guilt that has not been shared by someone else. There are no dangers that others have not experienced.

We cannot say the word *Father* unless the word *our* is experienced as enriching and wholesome. Our relationship with the Holy One may be considered as non-existent unless we experience participation in the community of the saints. The two are inseparably connected.

Once we find God, we also find the children of God. Saying *Father* implies having family.

Thus these two words not only open up a beautiful vision of Heaven, they also present us with a wonderful view of earth. The vertical relationship with God leads to the horizontal communion with the saints.

We suggested at the outset that we would look at the Lord's Prayer one word at the time, and see if we can agree with it. So I ask you now, “Does the word *our* flow naturally from your heart? Do you have such a vital link with your neighbours?” Do you recognize that, if you want to confess that God is your Father, all people are his children? *Can* you pray that? Do you *want* to pray that?

When Jesus speaks to his disciples about their 'inner room', he states that they must close the door behind them. I think in saying this Jesus expresses a double intent. In the first place he wants to assure us that we need to be with God quietly and undisturbed. But he also warns us against any kind of phoney display of religion and righteousness. If you know yourself well, you will not doubt the validity of this observation. Have you ever noticed how consistently we try to make ourselves look better or how we try to act smarter than we are in order to seem more important? Standing on the corners of the street and bragging about personal piety did not die out with the hypocrites of Jesus' day.² That's why Jesus instructs us to go

² Matthew 6:5 "... And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men."

¹ John 3:16

into our 'inner room', and lock the door.

That does not mean that we lock others out. Quite the opposite. I enter my 'inner room' alone, but I must intercede for my neighbour while I'm there. You cannot lock anyone out of your heart. The meaning of the word *our* is all-encompassing. When I refuse to associate with someone can I still expect God to associate with me? When I cut someone off from my fellowship I will probably search in vain for fellowship with God. God and his people, the Father and his children, are inseparable. When I reject God's children I will not find the Father either. If I break community with the saints I will also lose community with God. God refuses to live in a heart that rejects even one of his children. He gave his Son to save this sinful world; where then do we find the audacity to reject anyone on earth for whom Christ came to die?

I have already discussed how, for some people, prayer seems empty and does not help them grow spiritually. Their experience of prayer is disappointing because they fail to find fellowship with God. They do not find their prayers answered. To them, God is nowhere to be found. If that is your experience you may want to check whether perhaps that word *our* of the Lord's Prayer is the obstacle.

Now ask yourself our two questions, *Can I pray this word our* honestly and without exceptions? And, do I *want* to pray this word, again, without exception? It makes no difference who or where this exception may be. It could be a member of your household or someone living in Timbuktu. It does not matter what this person has done to you, nor does it make a difference what he believes or to which god he prays. If there is any one person that we hate, or whom we have banned from the love in our heart, then our prayer will fade and die before it has a chance to go up. Then the smoke of our offering will slant down. God will not let himself be found, unless we have subjected ourselves

to his will, which seeks to find all humanity.

Once we learn to say the word *our* without reservation we can go on and say, *Father*. If we take issue with the word *our*, we get stranded on the road of prayer. Then we can't reach the wonderful richness which is contained in the word, *Father*.

* * *

When we want to talk about or to God, we must never forget the immense distance that exists between God and us. God is God and we are human. He is eternal and we are temporal. He is the Exalted One and we are very insignificant. If it were not for the fact that we are made in God's image and are created to respond to him, it would be completely preposterous to think or talk about him at all. He is the one who revealed himself and reached down to us. Even so, there is still an unsurmountable abyss between him, who lives in heaven, and us here on earth. He is distinct from us. Someone in the Old Testament once asked God his name. But the answer he got was, "Why do you ask my name? It is Wonderful".¹ I know nothing innately about God. How could it be possible? The scope of our knowledge is very limited. What is dust, or spirit, or life? What is death, or love, or truth? All these concepts are more or less part of our human experience. But when I try to reach up to the Eternal One who dwells in unapproachable light², how could I possibly answer the question

¹Judges 13:17, "Then Manoah inquired of the angel of the LORD, "What is your name, so that we may honor you when your word comes true?" He replied, "Why do you ask my name? It is Wonderful" (see NIV footnote).

² 1 Timothy 6:15b-16, "--God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see".

as to who God is? I could not even come up with the question, unless it was God himself who moved me to ask it, and urged my soul to search for it.

God is the unknown and the unnameable. Yet we may name him, because he has given us the name which we may use to approach him.

Even then, we must remember that it is more likely that a thimble could contain the water of all the oceans than that we could come up with a name that would exhaust the fulness and grandeur of the Name of God.

So, only God himself can say who he is. However, we now have an Advocate who gave us a window into heaven where God dwells. His name is Jesus and he told us that anyone who has seen him has seen the Father¹. He is the One who was able to ascend to heaven because he had descended from there². He is the one who knows us inside and out. He knows good and evil and he truly knows what truth and love is. He knows both us and God intimately.

It is this Jesus who has taught us, “This, then, is how you should pray: *Our Father...*”³.

What a wonderful name! The name above all names. People who know the Bible know that God has many names. We could easily fill a whole page in this book with all the names of God. In some way we might say that all the hundreds of pages of the Bible are in reality nothing else but God revealing himself to us, God telling us his 'name'. But the crown of all the names and the name

¹John 14:9, Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father".

²Ephesians 4:10, He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.

³Matthew 6:9 (Italics added - JVM)

that says it best is the one that Jesus taught us, “say, '*Our Father*'”.

A microchip can store a photograph of the whole night sky. One tiny chip contains the image of the visible universe. That image is not the universe, yet the image of the universe is contained in that one little microchip. It is a true picture, and it is the same as the reality it represents. Thus also with the name 'Father'; that name says it all.

When you say, 'Father', you imply love, care, discipline, nurture and wisdom.

Parents who love their children will have an edge in understanding and experiencing the relationship God has with us. Yet there is a big gap between God's fatherly care and our parental care. For our feeble attempts to be good parents are merely a shadow of God's perfect care for us.

Take some time right now and let your thoughts explore the word *Father*, and try to imagine the depth of its meaning.

When you say 'Father' you speak of the one who gave you life. The very origin of your existence comes from him. Saying 'Father' also suggests 'child'. I am his child. I am made in his image. I am his. My existence is from him and through him⁴. When you say 'Father' you imply 'love'. Again this requires us to pause and meditate for a while. This awesome eternal God loves me as his own child and carefully nurtures me.

A father cares. His mighty, yet loving hand will lead me and give me all that I need. When we read in 1 Peter 5:7, “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you”, then the word 'care' has two meanings. It means that he thinks highly of me and loves me, but it also means that he provides for all my

⁴1 Corinthians 8:6 “...God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live”.

needs.

A good father disciplines when needed. He doesn't do that for his enjoyment but because it is necessary. We, by our actions, cause the need for correction. Just as a gardener prunes his trees, so God restrains us. Pruning is necessary in order to curtail the inclination to sprout wild growth which does not bear fruit.

A good father nurtures. He speaks with his children, tells them all kinds of things, prepares them for life, provides leadership for the formation of the mind and will and emotions. A good parent will draw out all the best that is in a child, in order to prepare him or her for life. He watches carefully to prevent any warped development or wild growth.

Our heavenly Father watches over us in the same way, and blessed are those who do not think they can decide or take responsibility for their own development, but who would rather accept the leading of their heavenly Father in their lives.

“You, Oh Lord, are our Father”. Whoever thinks about this for a while can honestly ask, “Do I really need to worry about anything at all?”

If we reflect consciously on the fact that we are really God's children, we may confidently ask ourselves, “do I really have any reason to be down on myself, to harbour an inferiority complex?” Several times I have been on a mountaintop of a tropical island watching the sun come up. This was always a spectacular display of colour and light. The whole dark earth turned into a glorious display of depth and colour and beauty. As if new life was being born. In the same way the name *Father* rises over us like a sun which absorbs all shadows, which dispels all darkness, and devours all fear. All those who truly believe that God is their Father, stand in the powerful light of complete happiness. There is one more thing that I have not yet mentioned, but which should not be forgotten. I would like to illustrate this with the parable of the Prodigal Son. This young man stamped on his

father's heart while wasting his inheritance in lewd living¹.

When approaching his father's house he starts dragging his feet, but before he has a chance to get closer his father runs to meet him and greets him tenderly. True fatherly love never hesitates. When we say *Father* we say 'forgiveness'. Here we see most clearly the difference between our incomplete and tainted love and the Father's perfect love. Our love has little patience with imperfection, and is so easily eroded. Our love tends to die the moment we meet unfair treatment, or face evil intent. God's love triumphs over all. God forgives. He does so gladly and quickly and always.

The other side of the same coin is that the child, who can expect so much from the Father, has an obligation towards the Father. Thus, when we say *Father*, we pledge our trust and love, coupled with obedience.

The word faith can be used to express both love and trust.

Obedience is the submission of our own will, cravings and lustful appetites to a will and law superior to ours. The Father-child relationship requires these two things from our side: faith and obedience which are inseparable.

Faith and obedience are the two pillars forming the foundation of prayer. Without *faith* our prayer is just so much nonsense, a mere formality, a grim spectacle. Without *obedience*, and with no intention to be obedient, our prayer would be repugnant, an attempt to seduce God into complying with our will. It would be a lie.

However, when the name *Father* has taken root in my heart and has begun to show growth, then faith and obedience will blossom naturally. Just as the sun dispels the night so will the name *Father* remove all arrogance, stubbornness and rebellion. It leaves only one way, God's way. After all he is our *Father*.

¹ Luke 15:20-31

He speaks and we listen. He leads and we follow. *Our Father* means, “all that is yours is mine”; but it also means, “all that is mine is yours”. In this name which is above all names, our worries, our cares and all our sins will be consumed as if by fire.

At first you may be reluctant and fearful to say these words. But, as they become clearer and more meaningful in your life, you will come to see how strong and supportive these words can be.

Lord teach us to pray,

Our Father ...

* * *

Profit or Loss

A healthy spiritual life always contains a balanced contradiction: nearness and distance. Because God is near *and* distant.

God is nearer than anyone or anything. We live in and through him; we have our total existence from him. God is so near that I may call him Father, and that I may consider myself his child. At the same time he is also the exalted One who lives on high. He cares for the sparrows and the lilies in the field. He knows our needs before we even ask him. And yet he is the glorious, majestic God whom 'no one can see and live' according to the Scriptures.¹

In the words of Jesus which follow the opening words of the Lord's Prayer we see this duality of nearness and distance clearly expressed. The phrase *...in heaven...*, contains the richness we have *in* God, and the distance *from* God.

¹Exodus 33:20, "But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live."

Distance denotes separation, loss and poverty. The words, *in heaven*, seem to contain the possible suggestion that the nearness and closeness expressed with the words, *our Father*, is illusory. As if the gains we made by dwelling on the words *our Father*, are lost when we focus on the next phrase. But reality is different. The phrase *in heaven* enriches the words *our Father* significantly and gives it a deeper meaning.

Let God be God

The Heidelberg Catechism, when dealing with the phrase *in heaven*, states that “these words teach us not to think of God's heavenly majesty as something earthly”².

This interpretation hits the mark.

Our spiritual life is in constant danger of being sidetracked from our service to God. Formality, habit, fanaticism and boredom can all divert us from faithful service. I believe the greatest obstacle to leading a faithful life is that we make God after our own image and will, and that we serve him the way we choose. We think we are too sophisticated to harbour a primitive urge to serve gods of silver or gold, wood or stone. But we humans have not outgrown this urge to fashion our own gods, nor will we, in our own strength, succeed in overcoming the temptation to serve such gods.

The desire to make gods in our own image is rooted in the marrow of our bones. It flows like our life-blood which feeds every cell in our body. We must learn and be reminded that, grammatically, God is always subject. We must not make God the object of *our* thinking or *our* theologizing, nor can we study God as if he were a flower or intellectual concept. God is always God. He is always subject, the one who directs and

² Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 46, Q&A 121

orders our world and us, the object of *his* care and love. All attempts to create a concept of God apart from *his* revealed Word in the Scripture amounts to nothing more than an attempt to make God after our own image. And the world is full of arrogant people who make such attempts.

When we say, (and we say it all too often) “God can’t possibly do that”, “this is not fair” or “God can’t mean it that way”, we are in fact making a god after our own image. We expect God to be as we see him and as we want him to live up to our expectations as a sort of super hero. Nearly all our images of God are a reflection of our own humanity elevated to a supernatural and eternal level. That is the original sin¹ and it destroys all true spirituality.

When we want to think or speak about God it is wise to begin by saying to ourselves that we can understand nothing about God. He must say it, and we must listen. He must speak and we must accept.

We would do well to remember the first of the ten commandments, “You shall have no other gods before me”² or another Bible verse which says, “Hear, O Israel: the Lord your God is One”³.

There is no God besides him. He is the absolute, the Alpha and Omega, the first and last. God is unique. That is the word proclamation of the first commandment. And the second commandment follows right on its heels: Let this God be who he is. Try not to form him with your hands, or with your mind. The first law says: I am God. The second: you must let me be God.

When we pray *Our Father* and the words following, *in heaven*, then we are drawn immediately into considering his dwelling in heaven. In our response we must not bring God down to earth but leave God where he resides. We may not dethrone him nor force him to fit into the miserable and corrupted image that plays around in our mind. We may not demand a God whose righteousness and love fit only within the boundaries of our limited and corrupted human experience. We will have to accept God as he is. When we pray we lift up our eyes to say, *Our Father in heaven*.

Don’t fool yourself into thinking that you are free from the temptation of bringing God down to earth. Such thinking is hazardous. We can’t help but try to take God out of heaven and reduce or limit him to something that suits us better. We habitually try to make him fit our lifestyle, and subject him to our desires.

That is what 'heathens' do in their fashion; and liberal thinkers for their own reasons. But that’s what faithful believing people also do whenever they let their guard down. And it is worse when faithful believers do this, because they do it under the guise of being unwaveringly faithful and true to the Word-revelation. Unchurched people often see right through this charade, and recognize quickly how God is carefully made to fit the narrowminded milieu of like-minded idealists. It is shameful when seemingly faithful people take away the credibility of the gospel by reducing God to a graven image of their own invention, or by exchanging his glory for a poorly fabricated copy.

¹See Genesis 2:17 and 3:4,5

²Exodus 20:3

³Deuteronomy 6:4

The words, *in heaven* direct us to become still and respectful towards God. But there is a second part to the meaning. This phrase is meant to impress us with the majesty and greatness of God. It focusses the thoughts of a prayerful person to remember that the God whom we address as *Our Father*, is the same God who lives in the highest heaven, whose might is as great as his love and whose faithfulness is measured by his power. The words, *in heaven* stimulate us into seeing God in all his grandeur.

We can make many errors and commit many sins, but one of the most horrendous errors is to reduce God to fit our small minds, and to minimize the extent of his love, his caring and his power to our own trivial proportions.

Over against that common mistake I would like to say most emphatically, please, open and expand your mind so that you can accept God's true greatness, and see the magnitude of his love and care, his power and faithfulness.

At the same time, become aware of the huge host of powerful servants he has at his disposal. Enlarge your mind so that you come to know your all-powerful heavenly Father and his never-ending forgiving love. He *will* accomplish all that his love desires to achieve.

Lord teach us to pray: *Our Father in heaven*.

That is, "Cure us from our habit of forming you after our own image. Cure us from bringing you down from the heaven of your glory to the narrowness of our conceited commonality.

Lead us to envision your stature, to expect all things from you, to rest ourselves in you, to live only for you and to place our trust in you alone. Lord teach us to pray, ... *in heaven!*"

* * *

Hallowed be Your Name

The Only Right Order

Only after the salutation, *Our Father in Heaven*, does the proper body of the prayer begin.

It consists of six petitions. Three of these petitions are directed to God: *your name, your kingdom and your will*. The other three petitions concern our needs: *our bread, our debts and our temptations*.

When we reflect on these last three we must not lose sight of the fact that Jesus allowed us to approach God with the earthly needs of our existence; our daily bread and all that is related to it. Also, we may entreat our heavenly father with the needs of our soul: *forgive us our debts and lead us not into temptation*. Three petitions are vertically directed; three horizontally. In the Lord's Prayer a very purposeful order is presented to us. God comes first, then people.

In our own prayers we so quickly force ourselves and our wants, our needs and our concerns to the foreground. We might then end with a brief and perfunctory line of praise.

Jesus' perfect prayer, the Lord's Prayer teaches us differently: first God, then us. When God has received his proper place in our lives, then our physical and our spiritual needs will be attended to automatically.

Once the relation between God and us is repaired, a free and happy human life will naturally follow.

The renewal of this world, the liberation of humanity and a truly deep sense of happiness is only guaranteed when we humans acknowledge God's fatherhood and his absolute dominion over his creation.

In the Lord's Prayer we find a perfect mirror image of Jesus' words, "... seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."¹

Three times *your*; three times *us*. I'd like to repeat here that for the 'I' or 'myself' there is no room in the Lord's Prayer. There is only room for 'self' if, and when, God gets his rightful space, and my fellow creatures are included in my thinking. Prayers that may seem to be very pious and humble but which somehow maintain a priority spot for the 'self' still need to be purified in the crucible. Egotism, the root of all evil in our lives, drowns completely in the triple *your, your, your*, and *us, us, us*. That leaves only two ways to live, selfishly serving ourselves, or selflessly serving others. Individualism dies in the Lord's Prayer.

In self-serving everything revolves around us and our own concerns and desires. It is an impoverished and ill-fated way to live. This constant revolving around 'me' is like the movement of a screw which gets deeper and tighter with every turn. A self-seeking life-style is like a whirlpool or eddy in which everything disappears. The result is a life of dismal spiritual poverty that ends in spiritual death.

Self-denial is the opposite. One of the most fruitful requests you can make of God is to ask to be released from the terror of the self. All mental illnesses have one thing in common: a preoccupation with the self to the point of obsession. People are created to be in communion with God and to give of ourselves to others. Mothers often give themselves to their children in a self-effacing way and in marriage each partner can express this denial of self for the benefit of the other.

When life has this humble character it can be compared to an

opening spiral. The circle reaches upward and becomes wider and wider, higher and higher. In this way we learn to see the truth of Jesus saying that whoever wants to save this life will lose it, but whoever loses this life will find it².

Prayer begins in the highest heaven with God. In the opening words God is searched for and found, and our soul rests for a moment with the Father. It meets him and basks in his presence. What is found in such a meeting captivates the soul and fills it. God's radiance fills and fulfills all the soul's desires. God's name is holy, great and immeasurably good.

Then the words, *hallowed be your name*, well up spontaneously from the praying heart. It's as if we're saying,

"Father in your presence is life and joy, in your absence is darkness and death. Where we find you there is peace, your absence brings night and fear. You are all in all, and everywhere. We come to you away from this world though we are of this world which doesn't know you. It doesn't know who you are, your greatness, your kindness, and your holiness. It has forgotten you; it has lost you. We who are of this world have ignored your name. We have denied you your name and your place. Therefore we don't know who you are. We abuse your name and use it in vain. Please take your place in our heart again. Reveal yourself to our foolish, darkened hearts. Return to your temple and show us who you are".

This, the first and most important petition, *hallowed be your name*, is complete and vital. Once our heart has found God we learn to entreat God to be our Father again, and to let God be God for everyone in the whole world.

All other petitions are wrapped up in this petition. Many have

¹Matthew 6:33

²Matthew 16:25

searched and identified the root causes for the misery in this world. In my view there is really only one explanation: we have lost our relationship with God and have forgotten him. We have actually turned our backs on God and thus face our own shadow. A flower fades away once it is cut from the plant. A tree dies when chopped down and separated from its root. In the same way we, people, and the whole earth are estranged from God who is our life source.

All the needs of this world are first and foremost spiritual in nature. If only everyone knew the Holy One and would worship him alone. If only all of us would love him and give God his rightful place on earth, all the twisted relationships in our world would naturally flow into one harmonious whole. Wherever God's name is not hallowed, people fail to recognize each other as children of one father. Instead, they live as strangers and enemies, sometimes barely covered by a thin veneer of civilization, but just as often in unbelievable brutality, or pompous pretensions. In all instances they are lost souls who have no peace and deny peace to others.

Just look at those persons, either living or dead, in whose life God's Father name is honoured and revered, and you will note that the peace that such a person knows is safe from harm regardless of life's circumstances. No mutilations, no lions' dens, no rejections, no pyres of flames, no dungeons, no beatings nor any persecution can impede the ultimate outcome which makes us more than conquerors¹.

As we live and pray on this earth we are very aware of the tension between a perfect heaven and a corrupted world; between a good

and wonderful God and a rather depraved and deeply unhappy humanity. It is out of this tension that our first prayer is uttered. If this world had not fallen into sin, prayer would always have been only joyful praise and adoration. Instead, in our brokenness, prayer has been depreciated to a form of pleading or begging. It has become a cry of despair, a cry for relief and healing, and a cry born out of homesickness and longing,

“Father, your world pines away, because it does not know you and it does not know your name. You are not known to the people of this world, nor proclaimed by the people of the church. We have ignored you too long and now we have lost you. No one calls on your name in the marketplace or the boardroom. At best you are an inactive account, a first-aid station. We live in darkness and your name has largely been forgotten. Fate and chance are the new gods. People are afraid of you or consider you an immaterial entity. If and when people do call on you, then they often do so resentfully or improperly. We have lost your Name”.

The name of God includes all that emanates from him. Everything that originates in him and is turned toward us in this world is God's revelation to us. That is his Word, made flesh in Jesus Christ whom he sent to us. This Jesus taught us to pray the Lord's Prayer.

“We misuse your name, sometimes piously, sometimes in a sneering manner, but it always becomes a form of abuse; it demeans or drips with vanity. May your Word be heard again; may your Son Jesus be known again. May he traverse the entire world. Let people's eyes be opened to him. Let people see you through his eyes, and then find your peace and your joy. Father, let us know who you are. Reveal yourself to us. Take your place in our midst. Claim us to be yours only. Let your light shine over us. Open our mouths so that we will sing your praises. Make your church to be your witness, and

¹Romans 8:35-37. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered". No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

teach the world to speak your name with joyful, trembling voices. *Hallowed be your name*".

This first petition is perfectly complete, just as the first of the Ten Commandments is all encompassing.

In this first petition all the subsequent requests are absorbed. All the petitions that follow are subordinate to it.

Is it truly your first and last wish that God once more regains priority in your life? Not only in your own life but also in your view of the world?

Can you pray this honestly to be the complete desire of your heart and mind: Hallowed be your name?

Do you *want* to pray this part as the first and all encompassing prayer request which means that you want nothing more than that God's name will again be hallowed in your life and on this earth?

A deep sense of shame overwhelms me when I reflect on this petition and realize that Jesus has asked of me no less than an intense desire for God's name to be revered in my life and in my world. That is why I say from the depth of my heart, "Lord teach us to pray as the only all-encompassing prayer, *Hallowed be your name*".

Your Kingdom Come

The first petition, *hallowed be your name*, helps us focus on God himself. This second petition, *your kingdom come*, directs us to God's rule over this earth. We now turn our attention from the creator to the creation.

We might say it like this: "Father, we live in a world which you made. In your world we can only live and prosper when we remain obedient to you. Chaos will result wherever your rule in the lives of people and nations is not recognized."

God is king over his creation. The opinion of people does not change this fact. They may not recognize him as king and claim to be their own boss, that will not change God as being the absolute ruler of the whole creation. God is and remains the ruler over all things. And one day his glorious rule will be acknowledged by all people. His kingdom **is** here and now, and his kingdom also **comes** to fulfillment later.

When we read the sensitively insightful third chapter of Genesis, and learn how humanity fell into sin, we discover that the cause of our downfall was the desire to "be like God"¹. We want to be in control, king or queen of the castle, so to speak. But whenever we reach for that royal crown we make a caricature of God's kingdom. Then we become dictators or tyrants. Refusing to serve, we inevitably aspire to rule and dominate.

Like Satan, people have disputed God's right to rule. They wish to control life.

I have already mentioned that we pray from the brokenness of our

¹Genesis 3: 4-6. "You will not surely die," the serpent said to the woman. "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and **you will be like God**, knowing good and evil." (Emphasis mine - JVM)

lives. Our existence, our world is in a very sad state. Ultimately, we can't live without God, yet we insist on finding meaning and life apart from him. At the same time people tend to resist any and all rules or control over their lives. Masters and servants vie for the upper hand, each for their own reasons. In the Old Testament we read the somewhat strange expression, "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit."² So it is still today. Harmonious living is only possible when we recognize the need for leadership and direction. Families need parents; nations need governments; a ship needs a captain, and an army needs a general. And it is God who is ruler over all. But someone else has grabbed the power and authority and then proclaimed himself king over this world. The Bible calls him the prince of this world³. This prince has a large following. That's why this world has many 'rulers'⁴. 'Rulers' who each claim to control a part of this world and who each in turn tyrannize people and usurp undue power. Once these rulers have obtained their control they start to dispute the rights others claimed for themselves. The prince of this world and his cohorts have made life on earth chaotic. All the world-wide suffering caused by these tyrants in only one day and one night is astronomical in scope. It creates a world of hospitals and insane asylums; prisons and graves; bordellos and concentration camps. A world full of abuse, slavery, and immorality. A world of coercion and exploitation; lying, cheating and murder, escape

²Judges 17:6, 21:25

³John 12:31, "...the prince of this world will be driven out."

⁴1 Peter 5:3, "...not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock". See also; Nehemiah 5:15, "Their assistants also lorded it over the people. But out of reverence for God I did not act like that".

and dispersion; starvation and death. Whenever one person starts to lord it over others he will inevitably use his power to tyrannize others into slavery.

Hopefully the time of unfounded optimism that things are getting better all the time; that humanity would improve even more as time went by and that a heaven on earth is just around the corner has passed. The foolishness of this notion has probably been blown to bits by bombs and landmines.

Satan drove the insanity of such views too far for people to keep clinging to them. There has been so much brutality and insanity, and so many lies and demonic influences in the last few decades of our 'civilization' that many who never used to be concerned about anything now live with a prayer on their hearts,

“Father please take all world events once more in your powerful hands. Create order in our chaos, and give us a new and better world to live in. Let your new order shine through where truth and love, community and happiness can develop and blossom, to replace the current threats and fear of the nations”.

Many Lords and Idols

There are many lords in this world who each in their own way try to gain control. Some of the most powerful rulers in this world give allegiance to the god of money. They exercise great control and authority, and many submit and enslave themselves to their power and influence.

Then there is the popular god of lust, and the resultant sexual immorality; the gods of superstition, and mistaken or delusional ideals; even a god of egocentric and arrogant religion.

The damage and evil committed by those who rule in the name of these idols is immeasurable.

Just look at those who are obsessed by alcohol or drugs. The god of intoxication and addiction is especially prevalent today. His subjects are pitiable captives and are deeply unhappy. Others honour the god of good manners and public opinion. Being politically correct is their aim in life and they serve the god of contrived respectability. Others serve a lord of honour and power, or trudge along in the treadmill of daily routines and artificial humility.

Many are addicted to gambling. I could go on and on. The following of the prince of this world is very large. In fact “Legion” is their name.¹ One thing all these lords have in common with their prince. Their rule always leads to tyranny and their subjects become slaves. Their goal is destruction; they lead their subjects to death.

The Only Lord

When we have seen a glimpse of the Kingdom of God and its peace and security, we are appalled that we have to continue to live and breathe in the environment generated by the many lords of this world and their chief. Once we have tasted the goodness of God's kingdom we long for it's full revelation.

Only when we begin to see the kingly stature of Jesus Christ and have developed a taste for the new life dominated by truth and righteousness, does the eternal longing for the self-revelation of his kingdom evolve in us.

¹Matthew 5:8,9, ... Jesus had said to him, "Come out of this man, you evil spirit!"

Then Jesus asked him, "What is your name?"
"My name is Legion," he replied.

Let me give you an example. I'm thinking of an orchestra. All the musicians are seated on the stage and playing their instruments without direction. It creates a cacophony that resembles hell. But as soon as the conductor arrives and takes control of the group by raising his baton and demanding attention, all eyes are focussed on him. One signal, one arm movement suddenly transforms the mayhem into a stream of melodious notes, a harmony of sound that fills the hall. That is what it is like when people subject all their energy and talents to the rule of their heavenly Father.

Then chaos will be changed to order; decay will become prosperity; war will turn to peace; hardship will become delight; and servitude will revert to freedom.

Dreaming Dreams

There is a dream about the kingdom and kingship of God. It is the dream of all who acknowledge Jesus as Lord and who have surrendered their life to him. This is the dream of all those who have found peace and happiness under the lordship of Jesus, and project what they have received onto the world around them. For them endless and unlimited vistas open up. They develop a vision of a new world. They see God seated on his throne. They see people living and flourishing under the tender care of Jesus. They see the children of God playing in his presence. They see a new heaven and a new earth. They see the dead raised and a multitude that no one can number, a unity of purpose and delight under the unchallenged rule of him who lowered himself to death on the cross, but who has become Lord of all.

Isaiah, the prophet, was such a dreamer,

“The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling

together; a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain,...”¹

Some might say that a dream is only a dream. People tend to exaggerate. On the day of Pentecost, God's dreamers were called 'drunkards'² and Herod Agrippa considered them worthless fools.³

Sensible people would advise those dreamers to 'get real' and keep their feet on the ground. Yet I could list at least ten beliefs held by those 'sensible' people which are quite delusional.

The dreamer Isaiah saw reality very clearly. And I guarantee you that the apostles saw reality with 20/20 vision. Jesus, the best of all faithful dreamers, knows his people. The fact that those 'sensible' people think they can live without God is the most stubborn and fearful illusion of all. And they continue their denial of reality while the whole world is falling apart around them.

It is really God's faithful dreamers who have cased reality. Now the inevitable and important questions arise. Do you experience this Kingdom of God? Do you even believe it

¹Isaiah 11:6-9

²Acts 2:12,13, “Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, “What does this mean?”

Some, however, made fun of them and said, “They have had too much wine.”

³Acts 12:2,3, “He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also.”

exists? Do you believe that God is King now, and will reveal himself as King to all one day? Are you looking forward to that day? Are you homesick for that kingdom?

While I'm listing these, another question pops up. Do you know which kingdom *you* see? You only see whatever kingdom you serve! Remember, to those who are clean all things are clean, and to those who are unclean all things appear unclean.¹ If you serve only yourself, you see only yourself in all your activities. If you serve the prince of this world you only see the effects of his reign just as one who is unhappily married finds it hard to believe that marriage can be beautiful. And people who quickly speak evil of others, are quick to suspect others of malicious gossip about them. However, when you have bowed before Jesus as your King, then your eyes are opened to see his glorious kingdom. I am reminded of Jesus' strange words to Nicodemus, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."²

You can only see the Kingdom of Jesus when you accept his lordship.

What is it you believe in? Do you trust in the power of money or the power of deceit and force? Or do you believe in the power of truth and love?

Ultimately it comes down to this: either you believe in God, or you follow Satan, even though you deny his rule with your voice and your mind.

I hope you are homesick for God's kingdom and that there is in you a deep and powerful desire to pray earnestly and with conviction, *Our Father in heaven, ... your kingdom come.*

God is King and one day the splendour of his kingdom will be revealed to people and angels alike.

Yes, I know - superficially, this world does not look like God's Kingdom. A million and one events seem to contradict it. The suffering and corruption of the human race seem to contradict the Lordship of God.

Let me use an example. I could imagine a land where the rule of law is present in principle, but where, in fact, riots and insurrection seem to control the daily lives of the people. Law and peaceful enjoyment of life are very much on the books, and expected to be the norm, but in practice it is not visible. So it is with the Kingdom of God. It is here and now, but so many people reject his rule that tyranny, crime, unhappiness and fear seem to rule instead. The more the rule of law is evident in our daily lives the more peaceful our existence. So also the enjoyment of the kingdom of God. Submit yourself willingly and gladly to his rule, and peace will fill your heart and life. It is a long struggle in our personal lives, and a long struggle in our communal life, and will only be completed at the second coming of Christ. So you see: God's kingdom is here *and* it is coming!

It is here now for those who have eyes to see, ears to hear and hearts to experience. It is here for all who have willingly accepted God as the ruler in their lives.

The whole realm of sin and suffering may be in conflict with the vision of the world to come and may even ridicule the idea, but it will be absorbed and defeated by the coming Kingdom. The night will fade away; the morning will burst forth in all its glory. Just as the rising sun pours its light over a dark and dismal world, so also will the kingdom of God break out over this world, darkened by sin. God's kingdom will have come because his will is done - everywhere!

¹ See Luke 11:37-41 and Mark 7:14-23 for Jesus discussion on this issue.

²John 3:3

But remember this: all who pray for the coming of God's kingdom pray for their own removal from the throne. Then we will not rule but serve; not take, but give; not be lords, but servants of Jesus the Risen Saviour.

When we say, 'God' we mean he has 'total, complete and unconditional' control. God's kingdom is an absolute kingdom in the best sense of the word. He rules supreme. When Jesus' birth was announced, the angel who came to Mary told her that of his kingdom there would be no end.¹

There is no height, no depth, no distance, not even a black hole near the edge of the universe where the rule of God's Kingdom is not supreme, and where his sceptre does not sway or his rule does not reach.

When God is king he is king in his own complete unchallenged way. He is king over my body and soul, my house and home, my money and investments, my thoughts and my sex drive, my will and my life, my marriage and my family, as well as the whole community of the world's people. From him and through him are all things, and so all things must return to him.

The two Questions

I will ask those two questions once more. *Can* I pray this? Do I *want* to pray this?

Am I ready to stop building my own kingdom? Or have I found my happiness in submitting myself to God?

Am I ready to take off the fake crown that I have coveted all my

life and that seemed so important and desirable? Is that silly little tyrant, that miserable, arrogant self really dead in me? Am I prepared to take up battle against that overblown ego? Am I ready to deny my old self, to recognize the wondrous beauty of Christ's kingdom, and learn to long for him to rule in my heart and mind?

Lord teach us to pray, *Your kingdom come...* that is, "Father rule us by your word and Spirit, so that we submit ourselves more and more to you". Then the second petition will automatically follow, *your will be done*.

¹ Luke 1:32,33 "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; **his kingdom will never end.**" (emphasis mine - JVM)

Your Will be Done

The Lord's Prayer originates with God himself as *Our Father in heaven*. Descending from there it speaks about the name of God which must receive its rightful place on earth. Then it pleads, with longing, for the realization of God's kingdom on earth, the new order of things filled with his holiness, love and will.

Now the prayer comes to us personally. It touches our own will and inner self.

The prayer that lifts us out of the chaos and into God's kingdom finds its climax in the third petition, *your will be done*. After all, the root cause of all our problems on earth is the rebellion of our hearts against God and his kingdom. Wanting to do our own thing and refusing to listen to God is the source of all the chaos in this world.

There are only a few axioms in life. One of them is that there will never be a renewed world if there are no renewed people. The world does not make people the way they are, people make the world the way it is. Bad people make a bad world. Good people make a good world. Rebellious people make a destructive and explosive world.

The evil one only has power because, and as far as, people want to give him power. The world reflects who we are.

There are still many good things to be found in people and society. We can thank God for that. But one thing is unarguably wrong with the human race. Our hearts are diseased, and our will is turned away from God, at cross purposes with him. I have already said that most people's lives are wrapped in unrealistic dreams.¹ Among the false ideas of 'truths' which tyrannize them is their belief and conviction that freedom means being allowed to do whatever they desire. Doing your

¹See *Dreaming dreams* page [23](#).

own thing guarantees human rights and happiness. At the same time they insist that obedience and not doing your own thing is a sign of weakness and a kind of servitude which precludes the possibility of happiness and contentment.

Of course the exact opposite is true. Wherever people stubbornly follow their own will, they lose their freedom and become tyrants for their surroundings. Persisting in their own way they eventually find themselves unable to change direction and become stuck in their own pig-headed unruliness. They have become slaves to themselves and that is the worst kind of servitude.

C.S. Lewis once said that the reality of hell is nothing but this, that whoever consistently says to God, "Not your will but my will be done" will one day, after a thousand and one warnings, hear God respond, "OK, your will be done!" Hell is the epitome of being stuck in our own will, and being fixated in rebellion and in the drive to uphold our will. The consequences of following one's own will include a curse and a taste of hell. It is equally true that obedience brings a foretaste of heaven.

It may seem that I write this calmly and without much thought, but very hard lessons in the school of life have taught me to say this humbly and respectfully. Wherever people, wishing to maintain their status and rights, rebel against God, a fire is ignited that is not easily extinguished. A worm begins to gnaw that is not easily eradicated; a restlessness is born which does not easily die; a fear springs up that is not easily calmed. But, when God's will becomes our will, and we give ourselves over to his love and will, a happiness and peace follow which give an exciting foretaste of the world to come.

Actually, our will is a funny thing. We say that some people have iron wills. Yet under duress most wills bend rather quickly, and very few prove to have a will that even approximates strength. Most of the time our will is no more than a loose conglomeration

of egocentric tendencies, desires and wants. It is made up of an ill-defined collection of selfish pride, opinionated assertiveness, and a stubborn focus on the all-important 'me'.

God is the author of life, and it was his will that placed the creation in time, and then bound it together with laws. Always and everywhere, God is God, unchangeable and immovable. His will is the expression of his love, his truth, and his goodness which are also unchangeable, immovable and eternal. He will never forsake any of his love, truth and goodness. Therefore God cannot tolerate any wrongfulness that lives in us. It has to go! If it refuses to go, God will soon confront it. He is so gracious and patient that he gave his son to redeem us from the evil within us. But he makes no room for the evil itself which has its root and cause in our own will and obstinacy.

All who still want to assert their independence from God and continue to stand up against him, will collide with the Eternal One, and this results in annihilation.

The characteristic of a Christian is learning to say, gladly and freely: "not me, but you. Not my will but your will be done".

As Christians we long for obedience, and we pray with our whole heart: *Father, ... your will be done.*

There are two things I would like to point out regarding obedience.

First, obedience is tied to freewill. Voluntary obedience leads to freedom. God does not require capitulation, he asks for obedience. This means a freely chosen submission and delightful acceptance.

We don't usually operate that way. We tend to impose our will on others. Cajoling others into accepting our ideas and desires is second nature to us. God does not do that, he leaves us free, sometimes beyond our comprehension. If people refuse to follow him, he calls to them and woos them, he urges and nudges them, but he never compels them.

The Christian religion rules out compulsion. The very heart of faith beats with the rhythm of freedom. God wants children, not slaves.

Compulsion makes slaves, but obedience is the hallmark of children. “My son, give me your heart”¹.

The second point is this: *obedience* leads to *happiness*.

Disobedience is a little bit of hell; obedience is a little taste of heaven. If I do not obey the natural laws for breathing, but try to hold my breath I will suffocate; when I breathe rhythmically without straining, I feel free and unimpeded.

So also in the full and voluntary acceptance of God’s will we find freedom and happiness.

When the perfect will of our heavenly Father begins to guide us, both slave-like subservience and dishonouring egotism will finally cease to dominate. We’ll be saved from ourselves and become free and content in the presence of the wisdom and love of God. Our free will rests in accepting the will of God.

The Sign of the Cross

The third petition, *your will be done*, is very short and to the point. This petition compels us to look at ourselves and forces us to ask the question, “Where am I at in my life? Am I obedient or rebellious? Is my life’s direction focussed on deceit or submission to God. Do I resent the will of God, and find it repulsive and demeaning, or is the holy will of God my delight and joy?”

This petition demands a radical decision. Submission or rebellion. At this point in the prayer we will have to bend or break!

I wrote earlier that the Lord’s Prayer crucifies us². It delivers the

final blow to our old self with its pride and conceit and ego. At this point in the prayer you find the turning point. When you pray these words honestly, relinquishing the primal urge of your old self to exert your own will, you will place this petition before the throne of God and say, “Father, deliver me from my old self. Take away my foolish pride and make me obedient to you only”.

You can’t mess with obedience. A reluctant obedience is just another form of disobedience. Obedience born out of fear is slavery. What is needed here is a happy trusting acceptance without murmur and complaint, without suspicion or second-guessing. We need to accept with certainty that God is our Father, and that in all circumstances he knows what is best for us.

Don’t underrate this third petition. Pride and self-will are deeply rooted in our psyche. They are part and parcel of our deep-rooted thoughts and beliefs. Praying this petition honestly demands that we crucify ourselves. When we pray *your will be done* in earnest and with a pure heart we have an inkling of the fear and terror that Jesus faced when he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, “My Father,... not as I will, but as you will.”³ God’s children in following their risen Lord learn obedience through suffering. We must fight an intense battle against our inner self; we must face fear and despair; we must surrender our suspicions and misconceptions before we can pray, not just with our lips but with our whole heart, *your will be done*.

³Matthew 26:38,39, “Then he said to [his disciples], ‘My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.’

“Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, ‘My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.’”

¹Proverbs 23:26

²See page 13.

Once again I come to the dual question. *Can I pray this? Do I want to pray this? Do I want to be marked with the sign of the cross? Will I let the vertical connection with God wipe out the horizontal connection with my old self? Am I prepared to lose my life so that I can find it back in a new life with Christ? Am I no longer afraid of God's will, and have I lost my aversion to it?*

* * *

It is noteworthy that this petition which speaks of doing God's will also speaks of heaven. Heaven is heaven because there God's will is done perfectly.

If you want to receive that little bit of heaven already here and now on earth, let God's will be your law in every detail of your life. Completely! Let God be your God, whenever, and forever. As long as we suspect or feel that submission to God's will results in humiliation and slavery, we have little understanding and awareness of the enslavement of the human race. For we are inclined to be bound by our own views and live by the foolish domination of our own will. Then we also have no understanding of the freedom and happiness which is found in the obedience of God's children.

Lord teach us to pray, consciously and honestly, *your will be done!*

And teach us also that when your will confronts us, we will fulfill it, as quickly and completely as your angels in heaven.

Give Us Today Our Daily Bread

Our Christian faith does not exist in some ethereal never-never-land, far from any worldly reality. It is grounded firmly in the here and now. This may sound like a platitude, but it is absolute reality.

I called it 'our Christian faith' rather than 'the Christian religion', or 'Christianity'.

Nietzsche once accused Christians of not being true to the earth, and he was right in saying that. He was reacting fiercely to the world-flight position of so many Christian groups.

I think that throughout the ages, nothing has been as detrimental to the advance of the gospel as the recurring tendency of Christians to take a world-flight attitude in their lives and confessions. The attempt to make a Sunday religion out of their faith is a recurrent weakness of those who profess to be Christian. This seems pious but is, in fact, very unspiritual. Jesus came into the midst of humanity and worked and taught in the marketplace among the people. He confronted sin and its consequences, and began to build the beginnings of a new and holy community right in front of people's eyes.

The Gospel never stops at promising only a new heaven. It also urges us to work with all our might towards the coming of the new kingdom on earth.

Throughout the history of the church various disobedient responses to the Gospel have sprung up. In mysticism people wander around in a sentimental, surreal fog; legalism produces self-righteous attitudes; and discussing doctrine becomes the end-all for people busy contemplating the meaning of things. However, Jesus did not come to teach us such methods nor to reflect on the meaning of our existence. He came to heal and to set free this terribly disfigured, and cruelly maimed world. That is why the Christian who has understood anything about

his Saviour can never flee from this world. He stands firmly in the middle of life, and in a world full of moralizers and pompous talkers, he wants to work as a builder in the kingdom of God. Life with Christ is a most natural life. If you ask me what Jesus came to do I would say this: he came to transform this greedy, selfish, barbaric human race back into genuine human beings: ordinary, loving, honest, God-fearing people. God's grace has only one objective, to restore us to who we were meant to be in the first place.

That is also why if something is not 'natural' it is not Christian, even if it calls itself Christian.

People living without God are actually 'unnatural' beings, puffed up or uncontrolled. Sometimes both. But people who have found God prove the newness of their life in Christ by becoming normal, natural persons.

Natural human life is attacked on two fronts. Physical ailments and shortcomings threaten our health and even our lives; spiritual and moral shortcomings produce sin.

Both these afflictions are covered by this petition. First: *Give us this day our daily bread* covers all our physical needs with a blessing. Then, *and forgive us our debts* promises to bless with grace the poverty of our spirit, our soul. In this way the Lord's Prayer covers all our needs both for the body and the soul.

All things have their proper order.

The Lord's Prayer has three petitions that begin with *Your*, then three times *us*. First God, then us. Only when we have placed God's will first, will we be able to find our own proper position. Poverty and remorse, shortages and sins can only be removed if and when the relationship with God has been restored. Abundance and righteousness will become our share when God has been restored as king in our life. Poverty and remorse disappear when our will is broken and God's will reigns.

* * *

Give us this day our daily bread. I am so thankful that Jesus included these words in the Lord's Prayer. We may go to God for our next meal. That's how important our physical bodies are. At various times in the history of Christianity the importance of the body has been contradicted or denied. However, our body is not a disgrace nor does it belong to a lower order but only a different order from the spiritual. Both the physical and the spiritual were created through the will of the same God.

It's not that we *have* a body; we *are*, body and soul, inseparably one person. The whole spiritual side of us is inseparable from the body, and a healthy spirituality cannot flourish if we deny or neglect our body. Our bodies, and our male and female roles, and the way they are complementary to each other is an expression of God's image in us. In this prayer we may come to God for all our physical bodily needs, because our whole physical side has suffered and is damaged, sold out under the power of sin. Jesus said, "you may ask your father in heaven for a bagged lunch." What he wants to say is that there is nothing that you cannot bring in prayer to your heavenly father. You may ask him for shoes and a winter coat; for a room and a bed; for a job and a vacation; you may tell him about your need for a life partner, or your longing to have a child. You may point out your pain and oppressive suffocating feelings. You may show him your empty wallet and depleted bank account; your empty larder and your exhausted stores. You may tell him about the cost of living and your unrewarding work. I could go on and on about all the things you may tell your father in heaven. Everything, all the time. God is not a God who is far away and a stranger, high up in his distant heaven. Not at all. He is a God who is near, a God who shares our joys and sorrows and who

wishes to provide for all our needs. There is no hunger he cannot satisfy and no thirst he cannot quench.

With this petition Jesus brings God right into our living room and our workplace. Our faith is not for Sundays only. Our God is a God for every day and every need. Not just a God we meet in church, but a God who is in our living room, the market place, the army barracks and the ships on the high sea.

Give us this day our daily bread. When Jesus spoke these words he was speaking to ordinary farmers and fishermen, sandal makers and carpenters; all people who had to work hard for their living. Jesus knew the fear of failure and not having food tomorrow. In our western world we know very little of the anxious poverty that so many people in third world countries face daily. In many parts of the world people never have enough to eat to know what it means to be satisfied. Jesus knows about scarcity, and therefore he knows about our fear of running out of things to eat. And he says, “Don’t be afraid, come with all your needs to your Father in heaven”. Place them in his strong, caring, fatherly hands. You are safe with him.

This petition places us in the middle of everyday normal living. Except that normal is not always ‘normal’. Sometimes it is the opposite: abnormally hard for very many. Living can become a tough battle in an unforgiving and harsh environment; a back-breaking struggle on a parched piece of land which reluctantly provides some basic staples, and then only when people struggle in the sweat of their brow¹. Equally devastating is any economic competition which operates without consideration for its victims. Some will gladly work hard with great enthusiasm to prevent

¹Genesis 3:17-19, “To Adam he said, ‘... through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food....’”

others from living peaceful and satisfied lives. Many of us are not very compassionate when our comfort is threatened.

Jesus not only knows our deepest fears, he also knows our ever present covetousness.

Our daily needs are always precarious. On this earth any rather minor event can result in devastation. Any climatic change can lead to major crop failures or cause death to thousands in floods or storms. A shift in the jet stream causes major changes in agricultural productivity and economic viability.

In our complex world economy there is another problem. Small variations in the economic barometers may put tens of thousands of people out of work.

Jesus knew that too, and his simple audience from an agrarian society experienced the same uncertainties that we face today. Just think of the hirelings waiting in the marketplace² for day labour jobs. We are not independent one from another. Rather, we are very much interdependent, extremely vulnerable and ultimately weak. That is why whenever we pray, *give us this day our daily bread*, we are expressing our deep and constant dependence on God for all our needs.

“Father I am so terribly dependent, I am unable stand my own ground. I am dependent on many others, but most of all I am dependent on you my Father in heaven. Life is from you and through you³. I cannot live without you, even for a day”.

² Matthew 20: 6,7, "About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?' 'Because no one has hired us,' they answered.

³1 Corinthians 8: 6, "... for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live".

It is very healthy and fruitful for us to stop and think about this prayer for a little while. In days of peace and prosperity we so easily accept it as normal that we can buy what we want, and eat as we please. Jesus wants us to know that we are like children and completely dependent on Him for all our needs.

Is it easy or difficult to pray this?

We have already seen that no petition of the Lord's Prayer can be prayed honestly from the heart, unless we are prepared to surrender our egos. At first it may seem that this petition contradicts that idea. It seems easy and quick to say, *give us today our daily bread*, but that is not true. It shows once again how important it is for us to weigh each petition carefully. When you really think it through you will come to the realization that this petition of the Lord's Prayer is possibly the most difficult of all.

Who asks for bread? Beggars, right? Do you consider it fun to become a beggar? To give is not easy for us; but -- to receive is even more difficult, and to ask is most difficult of all. The poorer we are the more difficult it is to ask, because asking is an acknowledgement of our own failure and insignificance. This first word *give* does not flow naturally over our lips. Are you becoming aware now that it is not so easy to pray this request? And there is still more. When we pray for *our daily bread*, we actually pray against having any riches, any surplus. When we pray this petition earnestly we are actually giving up any longing for riches and desire for comforts. Are you prepared to do that? Whenever I say, *give* I'm really saying, "I don't have it, and I don't expect it from my own efforts."

I have often thought about John D. Rockefeller, in his time the richest man on earth. During the later years of his life he looked like a living mummy because he had a critical stomach ailment.

He had all the money in the world but an appetite for only a few tea biscuits soaked in milk. It reminds me of Jesus' words in Luke, "Then [the rich man] said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry"'"¹. Even the very rich can only eat when God grants them health and an appetite.

However, one does not have to be a billionaire to suffer from the delusion of self-sufficiency.

Most people have a hard time freeing themselves from being profoundly impressed by money, position, and the protective measures needed to safeguard their securities. Who of us are truly free from the belief that we are dependent on other people and things, money and possessions? In this petition Jesus wants to teach us that, though we should not deny that we need each other, we are ultimately totally dependent on our heavenly Father. That is why Jesus teaches rich and poor alike, without any distinction, to come humbly before God and ask, *Our Father, ... give us this day our daily bread*.

One Word at the Time

It helped me a lot to pray this petition one word at a time. That way I was struck over and again both by the unexpected beauty of this petition and by its unexpected difficulties.

Let us first look at the word *give*. We can pronounce this word two ways. We can ask and we can demand. We can dictate and we can pray. Our natural tendency is to pronounce this word as a demand. We demand our rights. One of the basic human rights we claim is the right to respectable living. We demand

¹Luke 12:18,19

food and drink and a roof over our heads. Labour relations have pretty much boiled down to stated demands, and if the employer does not 'give', then the workers will 'take', by force if needed, what they say is rightfully theirs. Give or I'll take!

The rich have brought this attitude down on themselves because they have always considered it their right to take, at whatever cost to others. Therefore, when the masses of workers began to demand and threaten to take, even by means of revolution, what they considered their due, they only repeated what the rich had been doing for centuries.

Humanity knows all about its rights. But what exactly are our rights? When we really search our hearts critically we might come to the conclusion that we deserve a good drubbing. The consequences of our actions elicit God's judgement on us and a demand for penalty payments for our folly.

We demand our rights, and quickly state what we have accomplished 'with our own hands' and what we have earned with 'our own brains' and 'our good planning'.

But did you make your hands? Did you make them strong? Did you establish your IQ? And create your brain power?

Did you give yourself good judgment? Did you give the rain in season, and did you make the earth fruitful? Did you design the grains of wheat to sprout in the spring? Did you force the mighty waters to run to the sea?¹

Jesus teaches us something different. He teaches us to pronounce the little word *give* prayerfully. Not by demanding but by pleading. Then this little word will mean something completely different. It will express that my bread is not my right, but a good gift from my Father's generous hand. So is my health to eat the

food. It also means that, ultimately, it is not others who will rule if I don't take my rights in my own hand, but it is God who rules. I do not want to be arrogant and proud, as if I can maintain my life and the needs to support it. All my surety lies in the hands of the Lord.

Give, that also means that I will not trust in my salary or position, an inheritance or lottery winnings. I will not put my trust in my savings and assets or my indexed pension. Nor will I trust in my health and my mind. I will not rely on my muscles and good looks, nor my experience to see me through. I will not look to the left or the right nor trust in others for my peace of mind. I will not trust in the goodwill of insiders nor in personal connections to reach my safeguarded objectives.

I am weak and totally dependent on the Lord. I will focus all my attention on him to lead me and provide in my life. He has the whole world in his hands.

* * *

Next the words "*us, our*".

We find the two words *us* and *our* in this one petition. It is as if the Lord wants to impress on us not to forget our neighbours, our community when we pray for our daily bread. As if the Lord wants to warn us that our innate egotism plays such a powerful role exactly for the struggle to obtain our daily bread. When you pray, *give us*, you're in fact saying that you don't ask this only for yourself but also for your neighbours, as much for them as you would want for yourself: please care for others as much as you care for me.

From the beginning the world has seen a struggle between rich and poor; between the haves and the have-nots.² Now Jesus teaches the haves to pray for the needs of the have-nots. To pray

¹Job 38:4 "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?

Tell me, if you understand."

(It can be helpful to continue reading Job 38 to the end of chapter 39)

²James 5:1, 4. "Now listen, you rich people, ... the wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you."

for those who serve them, and who work for them. Jesus teaches employers to pray for the employees. He teaches employees to pray for employers. He teaches us to pray for the competition. When that happens the issue of wages is no longer solely in the hands of the employer. And the decision to strike is no longer an issue only for the employees. *We* have called upon *our* heavenly Father to come and intercede on behalf of our neighbours, and to distribute to them as they need. In these two words *give us* we proclaim that we wish to love our neighbour, rich or poor, as much as we love ourselves.

When bosses and workers begin to pray this together will there still be a social problem? What do you think?

* * *

Next the word *today*.

We are often foolish creatures. Time can be divided into past, present and future.

The past is past, your boat of life has travelled that part of the stream and it is behind you. The past is gone and cannot be revisited. As far as the future is concerned, it is unpredictable and unsure. We don't know even for a split second what will happen next in our life. Both past and future are completely outside our control.

Yet we, and the whole world with us, have the irresistible urge to be very busy with either the past or the future. I'm not saying that we must have no regard for the past, nor think about the future, that would not be correct. I just want to say that the present is upon us with a clarity and urgency we can act on now. That is why Jesus says so emphatically,

“So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows

that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore *do not worry about tomorrow*, for tomorrow will worry about itself”¹.

He teaches us to live one day at a time.

There are many embittered people who ignore the present and destroy all hope for tomorrow because they foolishly persist in living only in the past.

There are many others who are so focussed on the future that 'today' slips through their fingers unnoticed. Anxiety is a great burden and it tortures millions. Worrying is basically an inability or unwillingness to live by the day, but always projecting on 'tomorrow'. Jesus places us in the present. He presses on us the task that is before us here and now.

He speaks of a God who wants to remove our past and cleanse it. He speaks of a Father in heaven who knows our needs for tomorrow. He asks of us that we do now what God requires of us today, which is two things, to love and to work as stewards of this creation.

We so eagerly work towards ensuring our future security. But the building up of our assets can in the final analysis be just a form of a practical atheism, a denial of God.

Jesus teaches us to pray *Give us this day*. I am satisfied when I have enough 'today'. The God who cares for me today, is the one who will be the same tomorrow². He gives the same love, the same care with the same faithfulness. Jesus teaches us here to rely, unconditionally, on the care of our Father in heaven who completely covers our needs everyday and everywhere.

¹Matthew 6: 31-34 (emphasis mine - JVM)

²Hebrews 13:8, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever."

* * *

Our daily bread. We could translate this phrase by calling it our *sufficient* bread. We ask for bread and no more. Just our bread, not even with butter and certainly not a Dagwood sandwich. Is that what we really want, just bread and only for one day? Can we be satisfied with so little? Can we be so moderate in our appetite and desires? Imagine if God heard your prayer and answered it, literally and immediately? Would that please you? I'm not commenting here on life insurance and pension plans. I am saying that our *trust in God* is a revolutionary power, and that we gain the peace that passes understanding under the caring love of our heavenly Father only when we are able to reject any overwhelming desire to rely on our own safeguards for the future.

The two Questions

When I review the petition *Give us this day our daily bread*, I notice that these words can only be spoken when they arise from a heart that is controlled and motivated by dependence, community awareness, trust and moderation.

Thus I again ask those two questions. *Can you pray this?* And do you *want to pray this?*

We feeble human beings, driven by our disturbing ambitions and fantasies, tend to dash from one absolute certainty and security to another. We squirrel away provisions and savings in numerous ways. But our storehouses of supplies amount to nothing as much as egocentric and selfish attempts to ward off ever threatening fears of famine and want.

However there is really only one security in life which never lets us down. The security that comes from trust in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Our heavenly Father who knows

that we need all these things.¹

Jesus teaches us to pray, "Lord protect me from want, teach me moderation, and make me share with others".

Can you pray this? Do you want to pray this?

Do you want to reject everything relating to human security and place your life and your goods in the hands of your Father in heaven?

Do you want to stand in the marketplace prepared to reach out and dole out to others of the wealth and riches that God has given you in abundance?

Lord teach us to pray,

Give us today our daily bread.

¹Matthew 6:32, "...your heavenly Father knows that you need them."
Read: Matthew 6: 19-34

Forgive us our Debts as we Forgive our Debtors

We are made of a body and soul and these two parts work inseparably together. That's not surprising because together they form one whole person. Yet for long periods of time we humans have neglected the interrelatedness of the physical and spiritual in one person. Nowadays some eyes are opened to see the influence of the psychological and the physical. We are also discovering that a person can get physically ill from spiritual and/or psychological causes.

In the Lord's Prayer Jesus lets our physical needs come first. First our bodily needs then our soul's satisfaction. When a person is hungry you shouldn't first preach to him; not a pamphlet, but a meal is what that person needs.

When people are in pain or worried it is necessary to approach them very tenderly when dealing with their spiritual well-being.

When the body is in dire need it is difficult to touch the soul.

People who visit the sick know about this. That's why it is so sad that so many people postpone the most important issues in their life to the end. When the last days come most people are not in a position to dwell long on the needs of their soul. When death approaches, consciousness often fails; speech becomes slurred, and clarity of thought gets clouded. When we are in a crisis situation, our needs overwhelm us. We can be so overcome by pain, so tired from fear, that little room is available for reflection or thought.

When a person is hungry one must give him bread. Giving the hungry a pamphlet of spiritual comfort and joy is like giving stones for bread.¹ The quality of the pamphlet makes no difference here.

¹Matthew 7:9, "Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone?"

But it is also true that you cannot live on bread alone². We are more than bodies, we are also souls.

Our Greatest Need

Hunger is a mighty sword. When that sword is at our throat we want only one thing: point that sword the other way! When hunger starts to consume people the results can be terrible. It can turn them into beasts of prey, unless they possess unusually strong spiritual qualities. When the body starts to dictate its needs, sin is close at hand.

That is why, when Jesus had completed forty days of fasting in the desert, the evil one's first temptation was to suggest to Jesus that he turn stones into bread. Satan figured that since he gets most people that way, he could probably also get Jesus to succumb.

When hunger threatens our life all other needs take a back seat. Even our sexual drive is silenced. There remains only one thought, the urgency to still our hunger pangs.

Yet there is one desire that is stronger than hunger, the need to calm a guilty conscience. If hunger can be called a sword, a guilty conscience is a burning fire. Jesus calls guilt an unquenchable fire³. There is an undeniable inner connection between an empty stomach and a guilty conscience. The stomach and soul both crave satisfaction.

Let me illustrate:

- ▶ Behind all of life's afflictions lies the problem of our

²Matthew 4:4, Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

³Mark 9:47, 48, "... the fire is not quenched"; See also Matthew 3:12.

guilt.

- ▶ We were sinners before we became beggars.
- ▶ We are not just poor, we are basically corrupt.
- ▶ There would be no poverty if there were no sin.
- ▶ Even the earth carries the curse because we are fallen human beings.

In Genesis three we read that God told Adam, "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you..."¹

In other words, we have to work to avoid chaos and keep the jungle at bay.

We are not just poor souls who deserve compassion, we are also guilty sinners in need of grace. Jesus not only instructs us to pray humbly for our daily bread, but to follow this with a plea for the forgiveness of our debts.

The heavy Burden

You probably know the beautiful Christmas story of Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*. Do you remember how the ghost of Marley comes to Scrooge, pulling a heavy chain behind him. I have never forgotten the story of that chain. That's not a dream, that is reality for all of us.

A sin is quickly committed. That does not mean that it is over. All our sins stick like a crust on the surface of our being in the form of fear and dread. Dreadful because such fear is made up of a miserable mixture of shame and guilt.

No accusations are as painful as self-accusations.

If I despise myself even when I am respected by others I am

worse off than if others despise me when I know myself to be innocent.

No criticism is as devastating as self-reproach.

Every one has a "past". Like Marley, we all drag a chain behind us. That chain is made up of carelessness and indiscretion, of tactlessness and temerity, all of which we are quick to note in others.

We were silent when we should have spoken up, and we talked too much when we should have been silent. The chain of our guilt is made up of links that reflect our wantonness and rebelliousness, our selfishness and obsessions. Some may closely identify with these observations. We may forget events but our conscience can suddenly trigger a shameful memory. Remorse can burden us like a deadweight. It can impair our freedom, destroy our serenity and sap our strength.

How do we get rid of these sins and how will our guilt be removed?

I believe we have three options, two of which are dead ends.

But the third option is the way that leads to real freedom.

Committing sin is a grievous and hazardous thing, but more serious than sin itself are its consequences. It can lead to the pitfall of desperation, or the folly of indifference.

I mentioned three ways. The first two are the roads of forgetfulness and repression or guilt and recrimination. But only the third leads to repentance and forgiveness.

Generally, people are incapable of looking at their own guilt and sinfulness with any honesty. They fear it will lead to loss of self-esteem and confidence. Overwhelmed by self-doubt they would find it impossible to go on. Have you ever noticed that people are the best lawyers in their own defence? There is no lawyer who could do a better job in clearing your name than you could if given a chance. When others can advance no extenuating circumstances on behalf of a transgressor, he is still

¹Genesis 3:17,18

a master at devising a thousand and one excuses for his actions. This universal defence system hides one universal truth: people are not inclined to face the fact of their own evil behaviour. They usually refuse, indeed, they don't dare to declare themselves guilty. That's why all are undisputed masters of their own self-righteousness. Let's face it, self justification is bred in the bones. The first thing someone who steals does is to be silent. Silence is a cover-up, a form of denial or repression. But covering up evil is a very dangerous thing. Our inner selves cannot deal with repression any better than our eye can tolerate dirt. Our eyes would soon be infected, and in a similar way our inner selves are affected by the denial of wrongdoing. Sin and guilt are dangerous explosives. Repression and denial can lead to inner tensions and ultimately to emotional and spiritual illness. Most neuroses can be traced back to repressed guilt, or denial of some form of evil or sin. Here too Jesus' words ring true, that only the truth will set you free¹.

Then there is the road called retribution. Somehow we must pay. The histories of all world religions are full of it. Somehow we want to fix things for ourselves. We want to be in charge of our own lives and rebuild the ruin we have become. We want to clean up our own mess; repay our own debts. We attempt to pay for our wrongdoing by doing penance, making all kinds of sacrifices, promises and compensations.

I am afraid that this second road is also a dead end. Once something is done you can't undo it. Whatever happened has happened and can't be changed. Once a statement is made it cannot be taken back. The past is past. It is inaccessible, unreachable, irrevocable.

¹John 8:31, "To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

And as our guilt grows and our sins begin to haunt us, our need to make amends also increases, becoming progressively more painful yet failing to satisfy.

But then there is the third way! The way of repentance and forgiveness. The chain can be broken. We can be freed from guilt and become truly happy and carefree. There is deliverance. Jesus tells us to hold up our shackled hands towards him, to stretch out our tired arms to our heavenly Father who is full of love and grace. Show God your shackles, your chains. Don't be afraid. One firm handshake from him and you are free. In this petition, *forgive us our debts*, Jesus tells us not to be afraid because of our misdeeds. Just stop playing the hiding game, trying to avoid the truth. Don't try to pay for your sins either, but stop torturing yourself with unrealistic sacrifices. God has not attached conditions to his forgiveness and his love. All you have to do is ask God to forgive you. It's that simple. Put your anxiety into his hands and you will receive a solution. What we cannot attain nor recover he has already attained and reclaimed. The Bible says that God has removed our transgressions from us as far as the East is from the West.² God gives life to what is dead and sets free what now is bound up. Jesus teaches us to pray, "wash me and I will be clean"³. When we pray this, it happens!

Sometimes it seems hard to believe that this is really true. Yet in two thousand years of the history of salvation millions upon millions have confessed this central truth in the Apostolic Creed, "I believe in the forgiveness of sins". The Gospel promises this truth with absolute clarity and urgency. Today, the experiences of a multitude of people throughout the world

²Psalm 103:12

³John 13:8

still confirm this truth.

Those who pray this prayer with honesty and humility will have that unique experience that sets the prisoner free, causes the oppressed to sing, and exonerates the accused.

Those who find God as their Father through the sacrifice of Christ become free and clean from their past and begin to understand the confession that says, "...as if I had never sinned nor been a sinner..."¹

* * *

Just as only food will still our hunger and only water can quench our thirst, so only forgiveness can free us from our sins.

Let me use an example to illustrate.

Suppose that I mistreated someone terribly by insulting and humiliating him. I could suppress my memory and pretend that nothing had happened. When I meet that person again I can pretend that all is OK between us. I could fool myself into

thinking that way, but the victim of such abuse will not see things that way at all. He would continue to be upset and distrustful. My denial or rationalization will not remove my guilt. Then I may try some other way to make amends or 'pay my debt' by becoming extra nice, asking his advice, giving him gifts, complimenting him on his clothes or car and try any old way to be friendly to him. Again I might fool myself this way, but the other can't be fooled. There is only one way that things could become right between us again. I have to recognize my guilt and confess it to him. I must show remorse and be humiliated just as I humiliated him. I have to take my guilt and place it in his hands and then ask him to forgive me. I cannot myself remove the evil that I have committed. But the person that I have sinned against *can* remove such guilt. By taking the risk of giving my guilt to him, I may be forgiven by him. Once the obstacles in our relationship are cleared up, the road to harmony and friendship is reopened and we can again experience freedom and fellowship.

We are foolish people who seem too keen on perpetuating our foolishness. Who has not discovered that suppressing the truth does not really work and that penance does not liberate us? Yet we constantly try these two ways to overcome our guilt. Why would that be?

I believe I know the reason for this. We refuse to become small. Forgiveness can only be granted when forgiveness is asked. I can only give something when an outstretched hand is extended to me. Those who keep their hands stubbornly behind their back cannot receive anything. We don't want to be the first to give in. We hate admitting that we were wrong. We may be willing to give up much, but the hardest to give up is the conceit and pride of our own heart.

Yet there is only one way to our salvation and that is the royal

¹Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 23, Question and Answer 60,
"Q. HOW ARE YOU RIGHT WITH GOD?"

A. Only by true faith in Jesus Christ.
Even though my conscience accuses me
of having grievously sinned against all God's commandments
and of never having kept any of them,
and even though I am still inclined towards all evil,
nevertheless,
without my deserving it at all, out of sheer grace,
God grants and credits to me
the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ,
as if I had never sinned nor been a sinner,
as if I had been perfectly obedient
as Christ was obedient for me".
(Emphasis added, JVM)

road to freedom through forgiveness. “Praise the Lord Oh my soul... for he forgives all your sins”.¹

What is more noble than to forgive an evil committed against us? Why then do we continue to insult our heavenly Father by our arrogant refusal to live by the grace of his forgiveness which he so freely offers!

Us and Our

Forgive *us* our debts. All of us are influenced by others as well as by circumstances and at the same time we exert an influence on others. That is why in our guilt we do not stand alone. Jesus places us all in a row, one beside the other. He does not speak of greater or lesser sinners; he does not make a distinction. Of course, that does not mean that there are no degrees of severity of sin committed, just as there are endless variations in the good we can do. Yet, we must all stand alongside others when it comes to our transgressions. Seen from above we are all as big, or rather as small as the next person. Those who continue to harbour rash judgements over others or who paint others uglier and meaner than themselves, still have little insight into the depth of their own sinfulness. When we truly understand our own nature, we tend to become more exacting about our own behaviour and more forgiving towards others.

Guilt feelings can make us very self-absorbed. So much so that it can destroy our whole personality. But Jesus wants to redeem us from that self-centeredness. He teaches us solidarity with others. He teaches us to be aware not only of the evil in our lives but also in the lives of others. Then we learn to pray not only for ourselves but also for those around us.

Therefore, these little words *us* and *our* open our eyes to the fact that apart from our individual sins there are also corporate sins. Sins of a family, a company, a church or a people. Sins of a race, a social group or whole nations. Such communal sinfulness nevertheless involves me personally as well.

As we also... Have you ever noticed how often Jesus in his teaching warns us against being merciless? And Jesus accompanies those warnings with dire consequences for those who fail to heed him. He makes it abundantly clear that we should not count on God's forgiveness if we are not fully and cheerfully ready to forgive those who have wronged us. Our willingness to forgive others must never cease. Do you remember Peter's question, “...how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” and the answer Jesus gave, “...seventy times seven times”².

When I sow oppression or abuse, then I will reap the same. You cannot ask for grace for yourself when you refuse to be compassionate towards others.

Asking for forgiveness is like saying to our Father that we have nothing more to offer; no claims to make; no IOUs to collect; we only have debts which we can't pay.

Refusing to forgive others is like saying that we still have moral claims to make and chips to cash in. It means staying outside the realm of God's grace. In the end, if we live our lives without compassion and forgiveness we will find our stubborn selves excluded from the kingdom of God's grace and favour.

It is true that people can make our lives miserable by repeatedly stepping on our toes and our hearts. Sometimes they exasperate us and cause us endless pain and abuse.

They also crucified Jesus and later stoned Stephen to death. But

¹Psalm 103:1,3

²Matthew 18:21-22

note the response that Jesus gave and that Stephen learned to say after him, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do"¹.

Jesus prayed this prayer with perfect sincerity. Unwillingness to pray this prayer after him must be considered as pure poison. Those who refuse to love their enemies exclude themselves from the circle of God's love, who searched us out "while we were yet sinners"².

This petition, *forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors* is like a pair of scales. The scale of our receiving forgiveness goes up when the other scale is filled with our willingness to grant forgiveness to our neighbours, and visa versa.

I would like to remind you of the following verses from Matthew 18,

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?"

Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him,

cancelled the debt and let him go.

But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.'

But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.

Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart"³.

The last words of this parable of the *Unmerciful Servant* are like a two-edged sword.

With this story Jesus completely destroys any vain notion that mercy can come our way without any serious attempt on our part to forgive our neighbours.

I once asked a man who had been treated unfairly and thereafter carried a hateful vengeance in his heart to read these words

¹Luke 23:34 Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." Also: Acts 7:60 Then [Stephen] fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

²Romans 5:8, "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. "

³Matthew 18:21-35

from Matthew 18. Before he finished reading he became so enraged that he threw the Bible into the farthest corner of the room.

Hate is a dangerous thing. At first we control our hatred, but before long it will control us.

The Echo from on High

As we forgive our debtors. Let me use some examples to show what Jesus meant by these words.

If you have ever heard an echo you will know what I mean. Your words are immediately returned to you from a distant mountain wall exactly the way you spoke them.

Similarly, if you say, "I won't forgive you", God's echo from on high responds, "I won't forgive you".

Children sometimes use a gadget that allows them to copy a picture onto another sheet of paper by tracing the original. That is a perfect illustration for us. If I, insignificant person that I am, say, "I won't forgive him!", our words are carried up to Heaven and God will pronounce those same words over us. When I say, "She will never come into my house!", God will say like an echo, "She will never come into my House!" If I ever curse someone here on earth the same words will resound over me.

That's why Jesus teaches us to pray, *...forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.* And he tells us in Matthew 7:1-2, "Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you".

If I refuse to forgive anyone, anytime, I bring the same judgement down on myself. The Bible says that God may turn his face

against us leaving us without hope.¹

* * *

Finally I will ask those two questions again. *Can* you pray this prayer? Do you *want* to pray this prayer?

Do you really want to become small before God and humbly confess your sins and shortcomings?

Do you, like a trusting little child, want to place all your sins, the ones you know as well as the ones you don't know, into the hands of your heavenly Father and say, "Father forgive me"?

And are you willing to add, *as we forgive our debtors*? Then you will honestly want to pray with Jesus and Stephen, "Father, forgive them".

¹Ps 34:16 also quoted in I Peter 3:12, "The face of the LORD is against those who do evil, to cut off the memory of them from the earth".

Lead us not into Temptation but Deliver us from Evil

Back into the World

That gift from Jesus, called The Lord's Prayer, is now near its end. When we have prayed this sincerely and from the heart, we will be calm and at peace. We find our daily needs of body and soul met, feel rich in the Lord and accepting of our earthly situations. Our 'today' has been assured because our heavenly Father cares for us.

We are also at peace with our past. The chain has been broken and our sins have been forgiven. What more could we want? It's time to say *Amen*. Security and deliverance are assured. Yet, it seems as if there is a slight reluctance to end the prayer.

Everything has been said and yet,...!

It is time to get up, to return to the fast lanes of life, but that means facing the big bad evil world again. Jesus knows exactly what that means. Often, he himself had to return to the demands of the day after being in the company of his Father in prayer. That is why Jesus adds one more petition to this prayer.

The 'future' is still ahead of us, with all its insecurities and dangers. After our prayers we get back to our daily reality. When we leave our inner room where we enjoyed our communion with God, the everyday world awaits us. And we know our weakness. We know that our heart tends to be deceitful. The evil one is so clever and his power is substantial. That's why Jesus teaches us to pray this last petition: *Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.*

Where is the temptation?

If we want to understand this petition *Lead us not into temptation*, we should look at James' words, when he says in his letter, that

“[w]hen tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death”¹.

These words of James contain a very large lesson in the reality of our life. God tempts no one. It is I, in my weakness, who cannot trust myself when faced with day to day situations. We have no choice but to face our often dangerous and fearful lives full of tricky and subversive possibilities. We are always prone to the influence of evil.

If only we were stronger! But we are often so fickle and so full of ourselves; careless and indifferent. If we could just hang on to Jesus' words to his disciples in the garden of Gethsemane, “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak.”² We are so quick to give in to our own desires and wishes. We fall for almost any silly excuse to fool ourselves. There seems to be no limit to our ability to deceive ourselves.

That is why if we want to know where temptation comes from, the answer will point most frequently to our selves. Thus temptation goes everywhere we go. There is no place where we are free from it. Old and young, all of us are vulnerable, every day again. Temptation can strike when I am sick or when I am healthy. Whether we are rich or poor, married or single; whether we're employers or employees. Temptation exists inside the church as well as outside. I am tempted when I pray and when I don't pray. Evil is close when I speak as well as when I remain silent.

¹James 1:13-15

²Matthew 26:41

That does not mean that life itself is bad and that there is a flaw in creation. God created life so that in the end he saw that it was very good.¹ The fault lies with me, and me only. All things are good in themselves, but how I put them to use determines the outcome.

The tongue is a wonderful instrument, but it can be used to curse and complain or to spout vulgarities and obscenities. The hand likewise is a wonder of God's creating powers, yet it can be used to steal and murder.

In the same way, there is nothing wrong with gold, but it can easily be made into an idol. Thus the most beautiful things on earth can be turned to evil use. In every paradise there is a snake to tempt us. Evil is not present in the things that surround us but in our own hearts.

Whenever we mention temptation, people tend to think first of sexual sins such as lust, adultery, even rape or incest. Whether blatant or covered up, illicit sexual acts are sins that Jesus dealt with firmly. In the story of the prostitute caught in the act, he said, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her."² And, of course, no one did. Instead they all walked away in shame. Yet sexual temptations, though perhaps the most obvious, are by no means the only or worst snare we face. And the problem is that this particular temptation receives so much emphasis that we are in danger of ignoring or belittling other temptations that are just as real and perilous. Sometimes through our upbringing we experience a strong aversion to these sexual temptations and we are quick to convict others of this sin. When our own transgressions in this area become public, we may be tempted to rationalize our actions until we discover that we have transgressed the moral and ethical rules for living and have

caused pain and upheaval for those we love.

Much subtler and therefore twice as dangerous are the temptations that have an ethical or spiritual dimension. A priest, an old and very wise man, once said that people had confessed to him every kind of sin one could think of, plus some. But, he said he had never heard anyone confess with a contrite, repentant heart to being possessed by the love of money. I should mention the sin of arrogance with its hundreds of shades and variations. Self-complacency, indifference, self-pity, self-righteousness, prejudice, and many other forms of conceit can be added to this list.

It is important to keep in mind that there is often no clear-cut demarcation between what is good and evil; what is of Christ and what is of the devil. The gap between these two is usually very blurry to us. God alone can see when we first step over this line. Evil would never make an inroad into our lives if its work were very obvious. Instead evil is capable of disguising itself as reasonable and therefore may appear good. Just look into your own life. How clear is it to us when habit turns into monotony, or frugality becomes greed? When does resolve become bullheadedness? When does caring become meddling? Can you tell when sensitivity becomes sentimentality, or when sorrow turns to self-pity? It is unlikely that wandering across this line requires a big step on our part. All it takes is a tiny little detour from the narrow road of following Jesus. Just as a flooding river can press against the dikes with unremitting pressure seeking one weak spot to break through, so the evil one never stops seeking to entice us. He looks for a soft spot with unremitting preoccupation, and mercilessly will never exempt anyone, especially not in their most difficult or vulnerable moments. He knows our weaknesses and the price we are willing to pay.

¹Genesis 1:25

²John 8:7

The narrow road

In his Sermon on the Mount Jesus taught us with the well-known words, "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."¹

On the broad road you can do whatever you like with your money, your time, your mouth or your body. Life is short, enjoy it! Whether you insult God or hurt your neighbour makes no difference. On that road there are no norms for life or rules for love. Don't ever let it bother you, it might spoil your fun! That road is very wide indeed!

The narrow road in Jesus' teaching is the road for life. It is safe and reliable. It can be an amazingly enjoyable and companionable road on which we travel with lighthearted freedom. But that road is narrow. One step to the right or left and you may become entrapped in quicksand or step on a mine. The narrow road is the one where we follow after Jesus, and keep company with him. On that narrow road we stay focussed on God and travel with his people. It is a steady, well-kept and beautiful road. A road full of blessing and happiness. But it *is* a narrow road and it gives us only one choice to live by. That means being led and moved not by our own ambition but by the love and truth of Jesus.

In the ancient Greek world the legend of the Sirens was well known. Sailors had to navigate a narrow and treacherous passage between two steep rocks and needed all their attention to stay on course. From the rocks the Sirens would sing an incredibly beautiful and tempting song, but if a sailor should pay heed, he would flounder on the rocks. The only way through the passage required the sailor to ignore the songs and to stay on course.

¹Matthew 7:13,14

Every Christian has heard the Siren song and therefore prays continuously, "Father, I know my weakness, I know my foolishness, I know the lure of the evil one, I know how easily I mismanage my way by forgetting your commandment to love. Lead me in such a way through life that I will not become entrapped or maimed but, that I, following Jesus, live a life that honours you and blesses others".

Deliver us from evil

One of the greatest difficulties in life is that evil looks so much like virtue, and good deeds can appear to be like evil. Solomon prayed a very wise prayer when he asked for a discerning heart to distinguish between right and wrong.²

But even if God has granted us an acute ability to discern quickly between good and evil, that does not mean we are home-free. Have you ever felt the undercurrent of the ocean? The evil one is called the 'prince of this world'.³ When we fall under his power we become like putty in his hands and will get sucked into the undertow of his influence. That's why Jesus adds the words, *but deliver us from the evil one*. "Father, whenever I stray too close to the lions cage in my ignorance and stubbornness, and get grabbed by the claws of evil, will you then in your great power deliver me and all who pray to you, from this destruction. Only you can save us".

The enemy from within

I believe it is easier to withstand evil than to honestly pray: *lead us not into temptation*.

²1 Kings 3:9

³John 12:31

When we earnestly pray not to be led into temptation then we won't be led into it. The evil one has only as much power over us as we grant him. So we are responsible when we allow him in and offer him lodging in the dark secret corner of our heart where we secretly harbour desires and greed.

Watch out for the enemy from within. Watch out for the little traitor inside your own heart. Do not lose sight of the little double-dealer that lives in your own heart when faced with temptation from outside. Do you understand that it is this seemingly insignificant little deceiver within us who opens the door to his taskmaster?

We certainly don't *want* to come under the unlimited power of evil. Most of us are afraid of becoming really corrupt but we are equally afraid of becoming truly virtuous. What we want is a square circle. We really want a little furtive excitement that comes with sin; just some pleasure and honour, but without becoming *possessed* by dissipation or pride. Let me put it another way. We don't want to fall into the hands of the devil but we love to pick up the rewards he seems to offer. We want the pleasure but not the burden of sin.

So our greatest difficulty is not that we remain upright under temptation but that we faithfully persist in praying with a humble and sincere heart, *Our Father, ... lead us not into temptation*. It means that the real struggle is deep in our heart. We must radically shun evil and fiercely cling to God; in other words we always choose for truth and love.

And now we ask those two questions again. *Can* you pray this petition, and do your *want* to pray it. *Can* you pray it means, have you made a conscious choice *for* truth and against the lie; *for* God and against evil; *for* Jesus and against yourself? Do you *want* to pray this? Jesus again challenges you to reaffirm the primary choice in life: to live a life of self indulgence or to deny yourself. Lord teach us to pray honestly and from the heart, *Our Father, ...*

lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

**For Yours is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory,
Forever**

The body of the prayer has now come to an end. We have brought our life in its full breadth and length before our Heavenly Father. No need, be it physical, emotional nor spiritual exists that we have not brought before his throne of grace. Our whole lives have been placed in his loving and caring hands. This prayer began high in the heavens. It descended to our level and traversed the earth; went down into the depth of our natural and spiritual existence. It exposed the root of all evil, and finally called on the saving power of him, in whom we have life eternal, but from whose side we have strayed.

The power of evil is the underlying cause of all suffering. The evil one is the destructive power that undergirds it all. Deliver us from evil. In this way the actual prayer ends in the depth of Hell. But that cannot be the final word of a prayer. True and real prayer does not end in Hell but in Heaven. Not in desperation, but in adoration. That's why in prayer we climb from the evil tempter up to God himself "for from him and through him and to him are all things."¹ Ultimately, all prayers must return to him. God does not only have the last word, our last word must also be directed to him.

We turn our backs on the 'prince of this world' and turn our eyes to the King of kings. We turn away from the might of evil and focus on the power of God, thus exchanging the oppression that the power of evil brings, for the glory that lasts forever and ever. The prayer is practically finished and we could now rise and return to the world.

But first we look once more to the God who saves us now and into eternity. We are safe with him. He guarantees our future. We

can confidently face the world because in our heart of hearts we know with absolute certainty: *Yours is the Kingdom and the Power and the glory! Forever!*

The prayer ends with praise. It could not be otherwise. Unfortunately, our prayers frequently don't get beyond the begging stage. Prayer that is only made up of requests is incomplete, immature and even unhealthy. In such a prayer we tend to focus too much on ourselves who are praying, reflecting an anxiety that keeps us from being lifted above our own weakness.

A genuinely mature and living prayer leads to a communion with God which results in sheer delight.

Have you ever noticed that we are never really happy as long we focus on our own needs? The key to real happiness lies in denying ourselves. As long as I am self-centred I am enslaved. All kinds of feelings of fear, shame and self-consciousness control me as long as I worry about myself. When we find God we lose our selves. This loss of self becomes our redemption. A complete and healthy prayer consists of three parts: petitions, thanksgiving and praise. When we get past the plea-bargaining stage and begin to truly commune with God we become free from the preoccupation with our own interests and worries, and begin to give thanks. For, it is in finding God that all our needs are met. At the same time, our thanksgiving blossoms into praise which finds expression in the words, *for yours is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory! Forever and ever!*

Who is Lord?

We want to meditate carefully on the words of this praise which Jesus teaches us.

This praising worship is actually a confession. We

¹Romans 11:36

acknowledge, “You rule, Father, you alone, completely.”

We should never consider ourselves beyond criticism. Only God is always and completely above reproach or criticism. I can casually repeat these words which Jesus puts on my lips:

Kingdom, Power and Glory. But I do well to take a moment to reflect critically on my motives and beliefs, and see if I indeed say these words with a conviction that comes from my heart. Am I convinced that I believe firmly and only in *God's Kingdom*? Do I really mean it when I say *for yours is the Power*? I need to make sure that the grand total of all my deepest convictions is *Yours is the Kingdom and the Power*. It is not just a theory or the proper thing to say, but a guiding force in everyday decisions in my life. I need to believe that God is truly almighty, and get rid of the notion that there is power in money and possessions or guns and bombs. I need no longer believe in the power of persuasive rulers and charismatic tyrants, nor let the crowds dictate how I should live. Not even the power of sin or the devil should be overestimated. Instead, I should claim consistently that at all times and under all circumstances power lies exclusively in the hands of the God whom I confess is the King of kings of all the world.

God is King! Absolutely! The ultimate sovereign. Without his holy will no power on earth can make a stir, let alone launch a campaign. “And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered.”¹ Whatever happens on earth, for better or worse, occurs only by the grace of God, with his divine permission, and under his direct governance and holy, perfect will.

The confession *for yours is the Kingdom and the Power* is a source of never ending joy. What can any lowly creature do to me? Nothing can adversely affect me even under the most horrific

circumstances.²

God does not share this power with anyone. The only one to whom he has entrusted this kingdom and this power is to his son Jesus, who for our sake and deliverance allowed himself to be nailed to a cross. What on earth do I have left to fear? Even if a hostile army were to surround me, I would not fear. “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me”.³

We live in an insane and violent world. Dark powers play a frightening part and we as people often feel very vulnerable and defenceless. But in this insane world we carry an assurance of great value. We live with the absolute certainty that God is King and that he, our heavenly Father, has all power, so that in the middle of this darkness and despairing folly we can nevertheless speak of *glory, for ever and ever!*

The first words of the Lord's Prayer *Our Father in Heaven* give us a deep sense of peace; the last words, the exaltation, delight the deepest corners of our soul. God is King! Absolutely! He is omnipotent! He has all power! Therefore, without a doubt, his will and his love will ultimately triumph and rule over the world and the universe. That's why the future points to a glory that no eye has seen and no ear has heard; a glory which has not been dreamed up by any human being but which God has prepared for those who love him.

Two Pillars

Jesus has said marvellous things about prayer. His promises regarding prayer are so abundant and so convincingly full of certainty that the poverty and sparsity of our prayers should be a

¹Matthew 10:30

² Heidelberg Catechism Q&A #1

³Psalm 23:4

cause for shame.

In all of Jesus' remarks about prayer two things stand out. He always ties true and honest prayer to *faith* and *obedience*.

If you read the context of the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 5, 6 and 7 this will immediately become obvious.

In the verse that precedes the Lord's Prayer Jesus says, "..., for your Father knows what you need before you ask him".¹ That is, "Entrust your life to God. He knows you better than you know yourself. He sympathizes with you. Better than any earthly father, your heavenly father knows what his children on earth need. The knowledge of his love is your guarantee and should be sufficient for your *faith*. Trust God without any reservation and believe him unconditionally".

The verse immediately following the Lord's Prayer reads, "For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins".²

With these words Jesus demands *obedience*. He in fact, instructs us to fulfill the great command of love. The hallmark of love is that it does not lose its power in the face of evil but, instead, it overcomes evil by offering forgiveness.

Faith and obedience like the pillars of a bridge, undergird the body of our prayers.

This becomes rather obvious when you think about it.

Faith. We would be fooling ourselves, and may even think we are fooling God, if we pray without trusting and expecting him to hear us. Praying like that is like striking a religious pose which has no meaning nor substance. Prayer without *faith* is as empty and senseless as meaningless chatter, and may be compared to cutting the legs off the chair on which you are sitting.

Obedience. To pray to God without intending to be obedient is akin to tempting God. It is absurdly arrogant to expect God to do my will and supply my needs without my willingness to do his.

¹Matthew 6:8b.

²Matthew 6:14,15.

Death and New Life

No prayer can in any way be compared to the Lord's Prayer. Our own prayers are as far removed from the Lord's Prayer as we ourselves are removed from Jesus. Just as he is unique as a person among all people, so is the prayer he taught us unique among all prayers.

It is the perfect prayer. It places God first, at the head of the table, and places our neighbour as equal beside us. It begins with God and ends with God, begins with petitions and ends with praise.

This prayer is born out of the brokenness of this life but leads to the glory that is forever and ever!

In that glorious state his name is hallowed, his kingdom has come, his will is always done by his people, just as it is done in heaven by his angels.

* * *

When the old prophet Simeon saw the baby Jesus in the temple he prophesied that this child, "is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel"¹. Likewise this prayer, taught us by Jesus, becomes either our downfall, or our resurrection to new life. If I pray this prayer in spirit and in truth not much of my old, egotistical self will remain alive. Every petition of this prayer crucifies something in me that is part of my old unredeemed self. But that is not all, for when I truly pray every petition of the Lord's Prayer in spirit and in truth something new begins to live in me. Then a new person with new ideas and faith, new love and compassion, new joy and expectations is born within me. Praying the Lord's Prayer gives rise to a new, mature self. A new person, renewed in the image of Jesus Christ.

* * *

This Jesus does not name himself in the Lord's Prayer, but that does not mean that he is not in it. He speaks in every word of this prayer, and it is filled with his Spirit. After all, who has revealed the name of our Father as fully as he? Who else has wrestled in his life and in his death as intently as Jesus to protect and honour the holy name of God? No one has ever prayed and worked as hard as he for the coming of God's kingdom, nor could anyone, besides Jesus, claim that the will of God was like food and drink to him.

Remember who fed the poor an abundance of daily bread, prayerfully and with thanksgiving to his heavenly father. It is Jesus who, in solidarity with us, identified himself with the sins of the human race.

Who else has known and endured the temptations that Jesus experienced, and who has suffered in the grip of the evil one in order to utterly defeat him?

The Lord's Prayer is certainly one of the most precious gifts that Jesus has given us. And he places that treasure in your hands. He gives it as a guide for your whole life. But this gift remains useless unless you use it under his guidance, and by asking him, "Lord, teach me to pray the prayer that you have given us." Ask Jesus to teach you to pray it with a believing and obedient heart, willingly and with strong and glorious expectation. Lord teach all of us to pray in spirit and in truth.

* * *

¹Luke 2:34b