

THE LORD'S PRAYER: A LAW/GOSPEL PERSPECTIVE

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Familiarity breeds contempt. Or at least a lack of appreciation. And we know the Lord's Prayer so well! It has been repeated perhaps hundreds of trillions of times and sung to many melodies on every sort of occasion, in every language and accent.

It was singing the Lord's Prayer in a foreign language that really made me wonder about the meaning of this prayer. Christine and I were missionaries at Lake Kopiago in Papua New Guinea in the 1970's. The first baptisms had taken place in 1968, and we arrived seven years later. Our early efforts to learn the Duna language included trying to sing the Lord's Prayer along with them. Their earliest catechesis was in song, and it was unlike any music we were used to: an intense, nasal, unison monotone.

Inu ame, karida geinia, go yaga biririga beli ruwanda ruwa. Goya hangu rindida guwa. . . .

We learned to sing it before we knew what the words meant; but several of the words in the prayer became early vocabulary lessons: father, sky, place, name . . . We also said it in Melanesian Pidgin, the trade language:

Papa bilong mipela, Yu i stap long heven, nem bilong you i mas i stap holi. Kingdom bilong yu i mas i kam long ol ples. Maus belong yu . . .

This is an amazing little text, full of ramifications for worship, faith, and life. Its key words stand for great matters: "Father." "Name." "Hallowed." "Kingdom." "Bread." Even the little pronouns are highly significant. No breath is wasted on adverbs. The one adjective, "daily," is found in no other early Greek manuscripts. It seems very meaningful, though scholars disagree about *what* it means. Jesus did not "heap up empty phrases" like some people he knew.

In any language, could any words be more important than these? They seek the favorable attention of the Almighty, the hem of whose robe fills the temple. Yet the words are not magic like "*abracadabra*." They don't need to be, since God's

blessings are abundant and free! Remember the vineyard owner who ridiculously overpaid some of his laborers? He defended his generosity by saying, "Am I not allowed to do as I please with what belongs to me?" (Mt 20:15) Such is our God! Our prayer does not seek to kindle God's favorable attention but presupposes it. The inherent strength of our petitions flows from the Gospel of Jesus Christ, "the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith." (Romans 1:16)

This is the prayer of the church, for the sake of the world.

Not all the world prays like this. If you think of prayer as the articulation of wishes, you could call even this is a prayer for the world!

If all of the raindrops were lemon drops and gum drops,
Oh, what a wonderful world this would be.¹

What a wonderful world this would be, if it weren't for all the (metaphorical) rain that ruins our lovely days! Here's another cultural text on the topic:

Someday I'll wish upon a star and wake up where the clouds are far behind
me, where troubles melt like lemon drops . . .²

People actually wish upon a star. They toss coins into fountains. But their troubles do not melt away.

I read on the internet that Abraham Lincoln said

You can have anything you want if you want it badly enough. You can be anything you want to be, do anything you set out to accomplish if you hold to that desire with singleness of purpose.

This is not only a fake quote; it is also delusional. That doesn't stop people from using it to excuse being monomaniacal in pursuit of whatever they want most.

Wishing, desiring, longing, yearning, praying . . . what's the difference?

Our desires are in disarray because of sin. We were taught to love God above everything else! But created stuff is so desirable, and we want so much of it. Concupiscence can be fun. As Augustine said, "Our hearts are restless, O Lord." Philosophical anthropologists call it a defining characteristic of the human species

¹ From a children's song by Joseph Phillips, sung on the Barney television show.

² From the song "Over the Rainbow," by Judy Garland.

that, among all the animals, we are so lacking in instinct. There are big gaps when we are born, so we must work out how to organize our inclinations. (Pannenberg 1985, 36-42) One theologian who is looking into this phenomenon is James K. A. Smith. He is building his study of worship, worldview, and cultural formation around the notion that “we are what we love.” We even design secular liturgies to express our great desires. (Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom* 2009, 37)

The Greek word for pray is *proseuchomai*. The root *euchomai* by itself means “to wish or long” for something. *Proseuchomai* indicates that we bring our wishes before someone who can help. Such as God.

Christians are a distinctive case of this because our master is not a self-aggrandizing leader. He does not lord it over us. He lords it *under* us. He emptied himself and gave his life for us. He bore our stripes. He carried our sorrows the extra mile. The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, not to take our lives but to give us his.

To pray to such a Lord is very different. We do not approach his altar with sacrifices and flattery, just “Abba.” God already knows our needs. He sends the rain willy-nilly and dresses the grass of the field with great beauty. Before we call, he answers. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for the ungodly.

Christians therefore do not pray to God as though God’s providence needs to incorporate a new circumstance. We do pray for God’s care; but not as though it depends upon our prayer. “All this he has done out of his fatherly and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or goodness in me.”

Ed Schroeder asserted, reviewing a book called “Prayer and Providence,” that the appropriate context for a discussion of Christian prayer is not God’s providence, but God’s Promise. And by “promise” he means the Gospel. He is *not* talking about such promises as “Ask, and you will receive,” which people like to take out of context. Schroeder is talking about “God's fulfilled promise in Christ” and the continuing ramifications of our faith in that promise. (Schroeder 2002) The Lord’s Prayer does not position us downstream from God’s providence, God’s care of creation. No, the Spirit of Christ uses this prayer to renew a right spirit in us who hold to the promise of salvation. To renew our faith in Jesus Christ as the one to whom we owe everything; and thereby to refresh our love for God and for one another.

If it ever feels like a pointless ritual, we need to wake up and smell the Gospel.

Contents and Structure of the Prayer

To explain how the Gospel supplies the power of the Lord's Prayer I must first describe how I interpret its various topics, and how they relate to each other.

Why did Jesus give us these petitions? Why are they organized like this? Why not include peace— "*Dona nobis pacem*"—or joy--"Make glad the hearts of your people." Isn't justice worth a mention? Why don't we pray for eternal life? If Luke can omit "Thy will be done," is it redundant? Is it covered by "Thy kingdom come"? Why is the prayer not framed with thanks and praise? And are sins, debts, and trespasses all the same? *With so many open questions, why does the prayer still seem complete?*

Let me tell you what I have come up with as a tentative answer to my questions. I think there is a discernible, perfectly rounded logic to the contents and how they are arranged.

I will begin by saying the obvious: there are two groups of petitions. We ask for two types of things.

First, we ask that our Father in heaven might have what *any* god needs to be a god: respect, subjects, and control. "Hallowed be thy name," we say. "Thy kingdom come." "Thy will be done on earth as in heaven."

Whether "thy" or "your," the specificity of the pronoun is essential. It is practically the predicate in each sentence; the "new information," which makes it necessary to say. (Maybe you can see that better in the Greek, because the last word in each main clause is "you": "Hallowed be the name of you. Come the kingdom of you. Be done, the will of you.) Among the many hopeful candidates for kingdom and power and glory, we recognize only our Father—not the earthly one, but the one who is over us all in heaven, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It helps to think of these petitions as one. We appeal to our Father for one thing: "**You** be God to us." "Nothing else, nobody else--**you** be our Lord." May the first and greatest commandment be fulfilled among us. They amount to a single cry. Spread out into three petitions, it is more emphatic, and we also see the three dimensions of the appeal.

Keeping in mind that it is one thing, let us look at its components:

First, we want our heavenly Father to be God to us in the realm of **language**. People represent everything, including God, with words. We make God's presence known on earth by speaking about him by name. People ought always to use his name to praise and magnify and thank him. God's name should never be taken in vain. Whatever impacts the divine reputation among us is addressed by this petition.

Second, we desire for God to be God to us in our **hearts**. God rules whenever and wherever people own him as Lord. God abides within God's children who worship him in spirit and in truth. He is Lord of all who love him, so God's reign or kingdom comes when people come to faith.

Third, we want God to be our God also in everything we **do**. We ask in this petition that what God wants to happen will happen in, through, and among us, throughout the world.

That is how I distinguish between the petitions. Word studies of "name," "kingdom," and "will" cannot tell us as much about the meaning of these petitions as the fact that they combine to form a whole. (The technical term for this is hendiatriis. One-through-three.) "Words, thoughts, and deeds" come into view in successive petitions, because what we ask is that God should be Lord over our entire self. That is what it means for there to be one God rather than several gods ruling different aspects of our lives.

In the second half of the prayer, we ask God to meet our needs. I wonder if the pronouns "us" and "our" should even get the emphasis! Once again, the single overarching concern is broken down into three parts. First, we cry to God to meet the needs of our present situation; then we pray about our remembered past; then, we bring to God our fear for the future.

First, daily bread. The staple food at Lake Kapiago was sweet potato; we prayed for "what we eat." But this is not restrictively literal. It stands for much more than food. *Whatever* we need now, whether it is rain or education or peace and quiet—is included in this expandable petition. We pray for deliverance from today's worries.

Next, we turn our attention to the past. Not the past *in itself* but the past as it burdens us today. As it haunts us and distracts from loving others.

All the garbage we carry forward out of our past harms our identities and can ruin our lives. Is it possible to get over the combined effects of 1) the mistakes we have made and 2) the hurts we have received? Do we have to live in our own waste? We ask our Father to make us what we are not: holy. We ask in this petition to be cleansed, both from guilt and from our justifiable but ruinous desire for revenge. We want to go into the future without all that. We ask God: “forgive our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

At Kapiago, people lived by a fundamental logic of reciprocity. Revenge was the order of the day; it was not a matter of whether, but when and how. That did not work for them, and it doesn't for us. Getting even doesn't get people anywhere; forgiveness does. Of course, in the kingdom of his left hand, as part of what Luther calls his *alien* work, God executes justice. Wrongs get righted by meting out punishment. As long as we are in this world, governments can serve God in this way, albeit imperfectly. But God has revealed to us in Christ that people will never be “made whole” through litigation, but through repentance and faith in our crucified and risen Lord. Through the forgiveness of our sins. Because we all sin much and are daily in need of forgiveness, this is what we all need. It is no accident that in a prayer whose engine is the Gospel, the only righteousness is God's.

Finally, the spotlight moves to the future. Again, not so much the future itself as what anxiety about the future does to us.

The human ability to envision the future allows us to be very afraid. Jesus always said, “Do not be afraid.” So, in the final petition or petitions we ask God to protect us going forward. In Matthew this is broken down into two parts, sort of like the petition before it: The evil which *we* cause by our caving to temptation or failing in the time of trial; as well as the evil of which we are victims. “Lead us,” we pray, “just not where we might hurt ourselves or get hurt.” The *prospect* of evil, like the memory of evil, holds a mortgage on our life and makes us dangerous to each other and to the world.

Thus, the petitions of the second section of the Lord's Prayer express in threefold fashion a holistic desire to live well. 1 Timothy uses the expression “the life that is

really life.” That’s what we desire. The message to God is that we are concerned about present needs, trouble from our past, and the future. We beg for life without the things that go wrong. So we ask the Source of life to restore the goodness of life. The separate petitions of the second half break it down so we can visualize the full scope of what we are asking for. We do not want a bucket with fewer or smaller holes in it. We want a bucket with no holes. The petitions are all asking for one good thing: Life. We say to our Father, who holds the world in his hands, “Be good to us.” “Give us back our life.” “Have mercy on us.” “*Eleison.*”

Condensing the prayer into two “super petitions” –first, “Be God to us!” and then, “Be good to us!”—has helped me understand the strength of the prayer. Jesus tells us “Ask, and you will receive.” And what does he tell us to pray for? Everything. On one hand, that our Father in heaven would totally be *our* God. And that he would totally preserve us from all our trouble. I hope to demonstrate that by distinguishing between law and Gospel we can see how that is more than a wistful, utopian dream.

How the Prayer Leads Us to Repent

Is this the perfect prayer? Is nothing at all missing? Although the topics seem comprehensive, two requirements are lacking:

1. One requirement has to do with us. This must be our prayer. We have to genuinely want this! It should express *our* hearts’ desire. Double-minded prayer gets us nowhere.
2. The other requirement has to do with God. God must want to give us what we ask for.

Some teach that the first requirement can be met by praying better. We must be more persistent, single-minded, and fervent in prayer. “Pray without ceasing,” and so on. Yes, we should. That is sound advice. But the internal struggle between the old heart and the new does not end in this world.

The second requirement can supposedly be met by thinking that “God is love,” and “God is good all the time.” But simplistic, “footprints-in-the-sand” faith is undermined constantly by the evidence of our eyes and ears, plus what we know about God’s justice. The trouble is that, apart from Jesus Christ, God’s

attitude towards us is doubtful. God is always active in creation, even in our lives. But no quantity of happy personal experiences can reassure us that God will continue to bless us. Winning the lottery might convince you for a few weeks that God loves you; but it might turn out to be a curse! On the other hand, a single negative like the death of a loved one might destroy a person's faith. People read God's favor and wrath into daily occurrences; but interpreting God's pleasure or displeasure from life experiences is not the same as knowing God's heart.

So let's try a different approach.

What truly satisfies the first condition, namely, that we heartily desire the things we ask for in the Lord's Prayer? The evidence will not be in our passion but in our *repentance*. Only repentance can be an honest and therefore pure cry to God from hearts like ours.

What satisfies the second condition? How do we know God is going to grant us what we ask for in the Lord's Prayer? The sign we have is the cross of Jesus Christ, our resurrected Lord. The forgiveness of our sins for his sake is the only unequivocal evidence that God will always be for us, not against us.

For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not "Yes and No"; but in him it is always "Yes." For in him every one of God's promises is a "Yes." For this reason it is through him that we say the "Amen," to the glory of God. (2 Corinthians 1:19-20)

Repentance and faith in Jesus Christ elevate this prayer from being a fantasy into a proper and powerful prayer. According to God's law, you and I have no right to ask God for anything; repentance means owning up to this. But according to the Gospel, we ought to ask for life abundant and eternal, because Jesus has rescued and restored us and reconciled us to the Father. The prayer works by a dual dynamic, first **reducing** us to sinners, and then **reintroducing** to us the joy of being God's children. "To those who received him, [Jesus] gave power to become children of God." (John 1)

For us to call God "Abba" would be rude, were Jesus not interceding for us! But we are not overreaching. We are saints, children of God who have washed our robes in the blood of the Lamb. Although the law of God continues to condemn us, we have the righteousness of Christ. We are *simul iustus et peccator*, actual

sinner and real saint at the same time. This paradox is an unmistakable aspect of the Lord's Prayer.

But you may ask, how does the Lord's Prayer convict us of sin? Praying it would seem to be the ultimate innocent activity, since Jesus gave it to us. We only ask for good things, and we use Jesus' own words. Does the law have to interrupt us at prayer?

The law of God attacks us on three levels as we pray this prayer.

First, the law is at work here when we compare these petitions to our own thoughts and wishes and ask ourselves, "Is this truly my prayer? Do I mean this?" Petition by petition, as we look at the contents of the prayer and the way they are stated, we ought to find ourselves guilty of sin many times over. Our true wishes are not what we tell God we want; our hearts are not pure but adulterated.

Start at the beginning: Do we desire that in all things God's name would be hallowed? Jesus could have taught his disciples something more modest, like "May our good deeds impress our neighbors somewhat." But no, Jesus disputes our love of God. Since we care more about *our* reputation and glory than we do about God's name being hallowed, this petition ought to make us blush.

Same goes for God's kingdom and will. Are they really what we want? For example, don't we know that God has promised to "send the rich away empty"? Do we want him to do that? Do we really want to call down God's righteous wrath upon us for *our* sins of commission and omission? Those of which we are aware and those of which we are not even aware? Look where Jesus got when he prayed "Not my will but thine be done"!

Let's see whether the second half of the prayer also accuses us.

Are the daily needs of all people equally our hearts' desire? Are we willing to cast our lot with everyone else? What is the point then of national borders? The word "our" in "our daily bread" does not taste sweet. It tastes sour to me when I include my enemies. When we "pray for those who persecute us," Jesus doesn't mean pray for them to stop persecuting us. He means, pray for everything good for them, even their daily bread!

Going on. Do we make it a habit to forgive those who sin against us? Have we forgotten their debts and transgressions? Or do we nurse grudges against those who have hurt us most? Is it a good idea to ask God to measure out forgiveness to us the way we do, so grudgingly? This may be the one point in the prayer where people sometimes feel uneasy about whether they might inadvertently be invoking God's judgment on their own heads. But we should be just as uneasy about every petition!

Are we keen on avoiding temptation, or do we relish the challenge? I think I know people who enjoy the cycle of lapse-and-be forgiven.

Deliver us from evil? I will not question the sincerity of people who ask God for this. Truly, there are no atheists in foxholes! But are we hereby asking God to deliver also our enemies from evil? Isn't there a wee bit of room for us to enjoy poetic justice?

Each and every petition, by itself, judges us. But we are thoroughly condemned on a second level when we realize that the two super petitions are perfect descriptions of what Jesus taught as the two greatest commandments. When we hold them up like mirrors to search our hearts, we find ourselves guilty of neither loving God "with all our heart and soul and mind," nor loving our neighbor "as ourselves." (Ref. Matthew 22:37-39)

The first and greatest commandment is only obeyed if and when the first three petitions are *all* fulfilled in us. God is not our God if we are all talk. Nor is God our God if we only act like he is. Remember that the Greek word "hypocrite" means also "actor," one whose actions are not real. Jesus quoted Isaiah: "This people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." He also said: "And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand." The three things can be discussed separately, but they do not exist apart from each other.

Because we are hypocrites, our thoughts, words, and deeds do not match up, and God does not give credit for partial worship. We do not totally love God, as we are commanded.

By its thoroughness, the second super petition, "Be good to us," exposes our failure to love our neighbor "as ourselves." Jesus shows us how our wishes *ought*

to run, and the contrast with how we *actually* think is a devastating criticism. If we loved our neighbors “as ourselves,” we would always be as concerned about all their needs as we are about our own, so we would always include them in our prayer. We would pray, for example, “Give us today our daily bread.” That is not how we pray. Night and day we seek our—*we strive for* own good, and the good of our own family, our own city, our own country. We do not regard a benefit to others as having the same value as a good we receive. We disagree with the one who taught us it is more blessed to give than to receive. We do not rejoice with all who rejoice or weep with all who mourn, only our people. In short, we are “not good” Samaritans. Jesus makes this plain to us by injecting the commandment to love into the second half of the Lord’s Prayer.

And finally: as though it were not enough to be condemned by each petition on its own and by the full meaning of the two super petitions, we also stand condemned on a third level when we consider the relationship between them.

We want to assume that if God is our God, he would be good to us. Instead, at this point our disqualification to ask for anything at all becomes most obvious. We must ask, knowing what we know about God through his law, whether it might be a good idea to run away! Hide behind a tree, like Adam. By what logic would a God who punishes the wicked, be nice to us? *Who are we* to expect God to be good to us? Have we forgotten that God has standards? Read the fine print of Exodus 20, the details of that covenant. Or just listen to Psalm 1:

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper. The wicked are not so but are like chaff that the wind drives away. Therefore, the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; for the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

Who are we in that psalm? The righteous who prosper because we do not follow the advice of the wicked or take the path that sinners tread? Maybe we are kidding ourselves. But how about the next line? Do we sit in the seat of the

scoffers? Without scorn and derision, what would become of late-night television? But it gets me right between the eyes for all the times I have looked down my nose.

So, are we among the righteous? Or among the wicked who will wither and perish? Do we have the clean heart and pure hands of those who ascend the holy hill to pray to God? Or are we honest like old Isaiah: "I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell among a people of unclean lips."

A reasonable god might give people credit for effort and adjust the law for difficult circumstances. But when Jesus tells us the Law he is, if anything, more critical than the prophets. Consider this general formula, which I think of as a "working outline" for the Lord's Prayer: "Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you." Is our first striving for God's kingdom, and for everything to be the way God wants it? Or is our first striving and our chief aim something other than to give glory to God? When Jesus establishes the correct order of all Christian prayer--subordinating our wishes to the necessity of God being God--he thereby condemns our way of doing business. Ambition and greed and a willingness to hurt others are sins we justify in our self-idolatry.

If not for the Gospel, the Lord's Prayer might make matters worse with God. The person has not yet been born who can *sincerely* lift their hands to God and say, "This is what I want more than anything!" We more closely resemble beauty queen candidates who want a scholarship but say "Most of all I want world peace."

The Lord's Prayer is serious law. Jesus absolutely requires us to wrench ourselves away from self and turn towards God, in word and deed. This is not good news. "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple." (Luke 14:26) *This is Jesus describing the same transformation of the heart he requires of us in the Lord's Prayer.* But turning away from sin does not in itself solve our problem. It is only a precondition for faith, and not one we can meet with our own reason and strength! We might be very sorry without repenting.

The necessary pivot in priorities may be as difficult to discern as to execute. We cloak self-interest in piety, like the man who asked Jesus, "Good teacher, what

must I do to inherit eternal life?” He was a good man who kept all the commandments. All he wanted was to add eternal life to his other assets. He would have done almost anything Jesus asked. But Jesus challenged him with a concrete test of whether he truly wanted to be his disciple. Was he ready to repent and believe? It turned out that it would have been easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for him to sell all his possessions and give them to the poor and then follow Jesus.

Jesus was not saying that if he did two things he could qualify to inherit eternal life. The challenge was much more radical. Jesus enabled him to see how he did not love God above all things or love his neighbor as himself, even though he was a “law-abiding” man.

So, the Lord’s Prayer leads us to repentance, even when if don’t feel like we need to repent. (Like my ancestor Lars, who took a bath every spring even if he didn’t need it.) Repentance is a necessary bridge to faith which depends on God for everything. The second part of this prayer (“Be good to us.”) does not flow out of the first half except—praise be to God! —when through faith we abide in Christ.

Good News!

The Law and the Gospel use the same word to answer the question of why God would be good to us: *Because we are righteous*. That is, we are like God. We belong to him. The difference is in how they define “righteous.”

If only those who are righteous according to the law deserve God’s favor, then, as the Lord’s Prayer shows us, no one is. End of story. Prayer is a waste of time.

But that is not the whole story. Along comes Jesus, bringing the promise of reconciliation with God through the forgiveness of our sins for his sake. Suddenly, God’s favor is within reach of anyone and everyone. Nobody who wants this is disqualified. Anyone willing to drop their phony, ego-based claim to God’s benefits is eligible *for Jesus’ sake* to receive every good thing from their heavenly Father. “He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? (Romans 8:32)

In Christ, the two “super petitions” of the Lord’s Prayer begin to work, because he underwrites them. The second flows out of the first because we are now assured

of God's love, not hypothetically but as revealed in the face of Jesus Christ. We appeal to God not on the basis of our making ourselves Godlike, but on God's condescending to us and identifying in Christ with us who repent. We do not curry favor; favor is in the Creator's nature. God comes to our level, giving his Son to die for us on the cross. Since, then, we have been buried with him in baptism, he raises us up to share in the life of his Son's resurrection. This is not a path for heroes, but a way for the weak. For you and me.

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.
(1 Cor 1:26)

Viewed in this light, the Lord's Prayer is an epitome or summary of Christian faith and life. Prayer is not an accessory to that life; it is the articulation of its essence. When the disciples said, "Teach us to pray," they were not looking for something to do in their off hours. They were asking how to be his disciples. His reply outlined a way of thinking, speaking, and living which is full and free, abiding in him.

As our very own pre-authorized prayer, the Lord's Prayer now becomes a Christmas cake packed with good things. Petition by petition, we get with Jesus. We rejoice to give glory to a God who not only gives but forgives! We are delighted to be members of a kingdom in which even the least of us is greater than John the Baptist. Seeking and doing God's will becomes our new freedom, because who would not want to work for God? We are more certain God will provide for us than children are sure their parents will. And we sure want to help our neighbors with their needs because they are with us! We love to flex our divine mandate—not to condemn but to forgive. We love to watch reconciliation spread. We are certain that nothing in all creation, heights nor depths nor anything, will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. As long as we live, we want to live the life that is really life, an outline of which is the Lord's Prayer, faithfully and imaginatively bringing it to life. Praying this prayer, we are adopted over and over as children of the God who made heaven and earth; it becomes our pleasure to do his pleasure.

When I was young, one of my favorite Bible verses was 1 Peter 3:15:

. . . in your hearts reverence Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you . . .

I thought “being prepared to account for the hope that is in us” meant being able to explain away people’s objections to the Christian faith. Now I see that our participating in Christ’s death and resurrection is not what we need to explain. It is *how we account* for the incredible hope that is in us. It is the foolishness of God which is wiser than our wisdom. Whatever we hope for from God, whatever wishes we bring before the throne of the Almighty, our expectations are never disconnected from the Gospel promise.

The Lord’s Prayer is the classic prayer of the body of Christ for all the needs of the God-loved world. When we use it—*and we should use it a lot!*—we take onto our lips and into our hearts the very purpose of God, the mission of God: that the world should be at peace, that we love and serve one another freely, that no one perish. That God’s will be done on earth . . . as it is in heaven.

Once upon a time there was a lad whose dream it was to live it up in some distant place. His wish came true. He did as he pleased as long as he could, until the money ran out. When the fun was over and he was ruined, he repented and returned to the father who *had always* loved him and still loved him. And when *that* festive party was over (the robe and the ring and the standing rib), he went to bed at peace.

This became his prayer. Life did not suddenly become a picnic. He still had to work. His brother despised him. He missed his mother. But he had faith, and therefore he had everything. He had been “born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed.” He was home.

This prayer was his strength and his song, at work and at play . . . before meals and after . . . when he rose and when he lay down. If old longings and resentment surfaced, and even when he grew old and close to death, he would think about how being led by his own passions had worked out and then he would funnel his wishes into this prayer, with its pattern of faith and love. He prayed, not that his father would love him better, but that he might love his father better.

John tells us that

When [Jesus] was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to testify about anyone, for he himself knew what was in everyone.

Indeed, he knew the mess and the turmoil in us. He understood our fickle fascinations, our hot and cold hearts. And into the noise and confusion of our conflicting wishes and desires, he brought—*and still brings*—peace to those who pray for it. A peace which, on earth as in heaven, gives glory to God.

Let us pray.

Our Father, who art in heaven . . .