The Lord’s Prayer

The Lord’s Prayer: A Law/Gospel Perspective

Co-missioners,

Our colleague, Marcus Felde, has emerged in recent years as a

specialist in the theology of the Lord's Prayer. He delivered a paper on the topic at the Crossings Conference of 2008. Seven years later he published an article in *Word and World* entitled "The Lord's Prayer: Who Could Ask for Anything More?"

And then there's the item we send you today. It's Part One—Part Two to follow next week—of a lecture Marcus delivered this past October at Saint Augustine's House, the Lutheran monastery in Oxford, Michigan. We can think of no better gift for a second Thursday in January when the fizz of New Year's Eve is yesterday's wistful joke and we're back to coping with the nitty gritty of the world as it is, the one within and for which our Lord teaches us to pray.

Read well. When done, pray gladly. How could you not?

Peace and Joy,

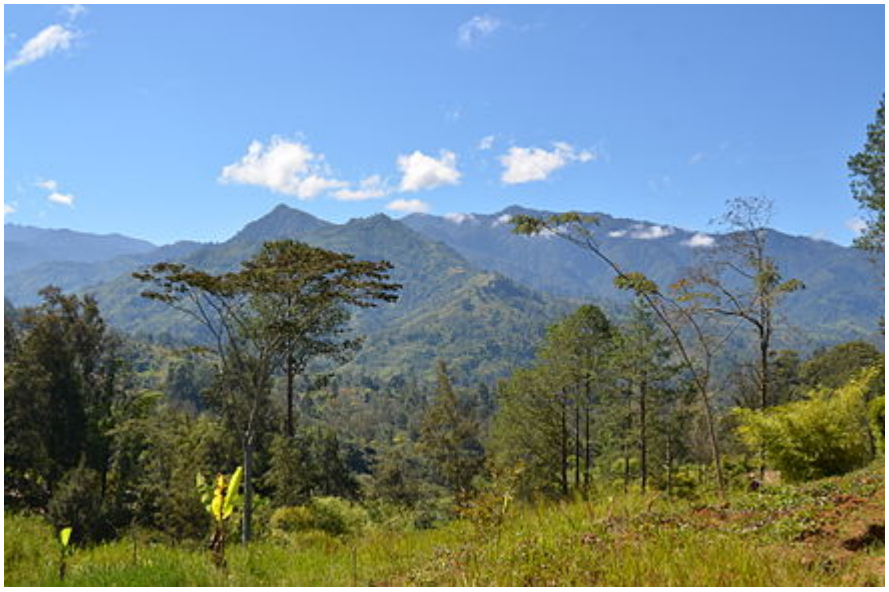
The Crossings Community

by Marcus Felde

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 yu 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 (Matt. 6:7).

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?” (Matt. 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.” (Rom. 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 the following 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 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 [3]. 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. [4]

The Greek word for pray is *proseuchomai*. The root *euchomai* by itself means "to wish or long" for something. *Pros**euchomai* 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.

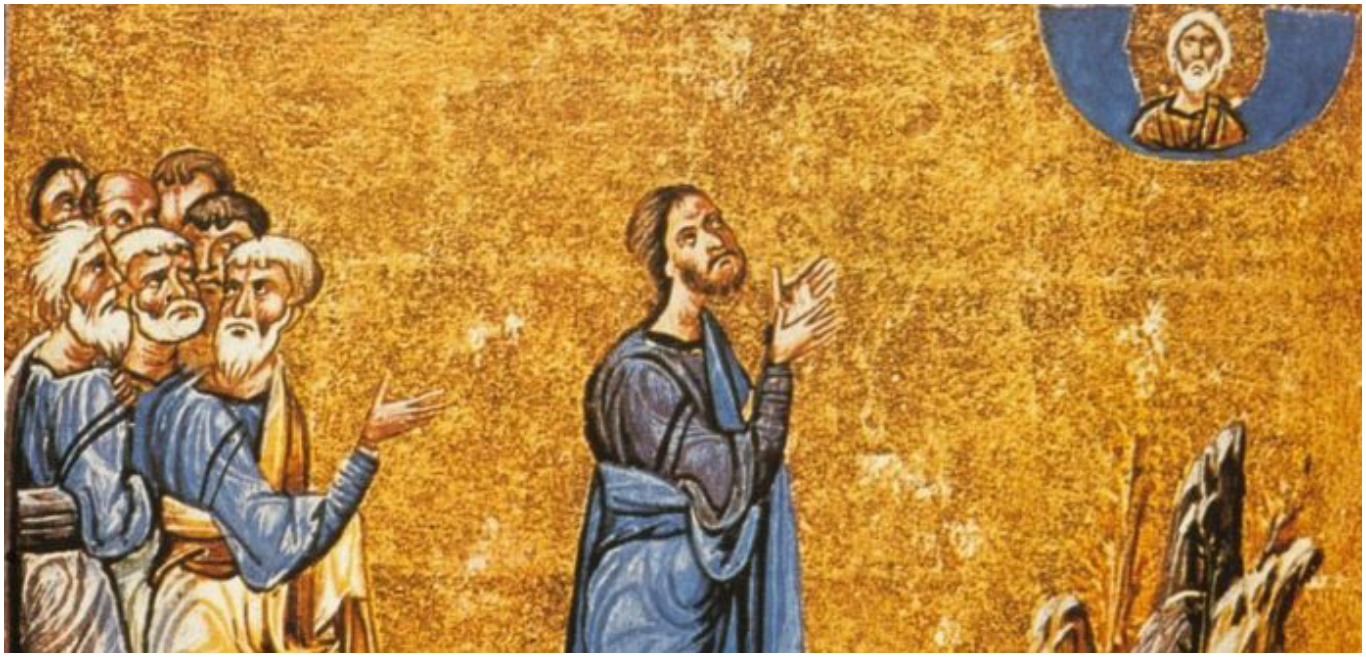
Christians therefore do not pray to God as though God's providence needs to incorporate a new circumstance. We do pray for God's care; but not as though it depends upon our prayer.

“All this he has done out of his fatherly and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or goodness in me.”

In a review of a book called *Providence and Prayer* [5], Ed Schroeder asserts 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. [6] 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

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he 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.

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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.

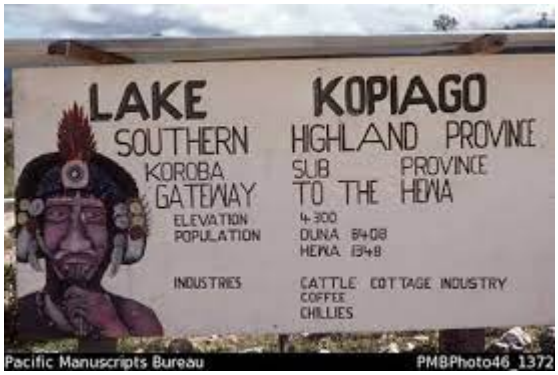
It helps to think of these petitions as one. We appeal to our Father for one thing: "**You** be God to us." "Nothing else, nobody else—***you*** be our Lord." May the first and greatest commandment be fulfilled among us. They amount to a single cry. Spread out into three petitions, it is more emphatic,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

—to be continued

Endnotes

[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.

[3] Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective,* trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Philadelphia:

Westminster Press, 1985), pp. 36-42.

[4] James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), p. 37.

[5] Terrance L. Thiessen, *Providence and Prayer: How Does God Work in the World?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

[6] Edward H. Schroeder, "Prayer and Providence" (online: https://crossings.org/prayer-and-providence/, 2002)

Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use
A publication of the Crossings Community