



Introduction

When asked to teach his disciples to pray, Jesus said, “Pray then in this way,” and then he taught them what we have come to call the Lord’s Prayer. In Matthew’s telling of the prayer in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, it is only sixty-two words in ten lines. It has only seven petitions. It is a short prayer; yet, as Tertullian, a third-century theologian once declared, it is a summary of the whole gospel.

If Jesus’ teaching can be summed up in the Lord’s Prayer in only sixty-two words, then some interpretation is in order. There is a lot of meaning packed into these ten lines, and it needs to be unpacked if the prayer is to be our road-map on the journey into a deeper relationship with God through Christ. If we are to follow Jesus in the way of God, we need to know what Jesus thought about the way of God—and it is all condensed in the ancient but ever new words that Jesus taught his followers to pray.

Many if not most of us, however, have prayed this prayer for so long and so many times that we no longer think about the words—we just say them. But rote repetition of the prayer is not praying. This, as we will discover over the next forty days, is a radical prayer, a prayer that turns things upside down. It is risky to pray such a prayer without knowing exactly what it is you are praying for.

So, how do we discover what we are praying for each time we open our mouths to say: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name . . .”? In this little book, we will follow some tried and true Lutheran methods for getting to the heart of what God has to say to us in the words of the Bible.

For a broader treatment of what follows, I recommend that you get a copy of *Opening the Book of Faith: Lutheran Insights for Bible Study* and read the excellent article by Mark Allan Powell, “How Can Lutheran Insights Open Up the Bible?”¹

Lutheran insights

LAW AND GOSPEL

As we work our way through the Lord's Prayer, we are going to ask how the text can be experienced as both law and gospel.

Lutherans say that the Word of God speaks both law and gospel and that both must be held together for God's Word to be fulfilled. One way to describe these important terms is:

- the *law* is that which accuses and judges us;
- the *gospel* is that which comforts and saves us.²

As we read through the Lord's Prayer, we will experience ourselves being accused and judged; we will also experience ourselves being forgiven, comforted, saved. It all depends on the day, on the context within which we read, on what's going on in our life of faith. The same text may be heard as law or gospel. Today we may hear it one way, tomorrow a different way. The person next to us may hear it in a different way than we hear it. For example, "Our Father" may be a comforting word of grace to us or someone else when the loving faithfulness of God breaks upon us. It may, however, be a discomfiting word of judgment when we recognize how little we act (and how little we want to act!) like trusting, obedient children of such a loving Father. The distinction between law and gospel will help us to unpack the meaning of the Lord's Prayer as we experience within it both God's word of judgment and God's words of grace, forgiveness, and salvation.

WHAT SHOWS FORTH CHRIST

Lutherans believe that the Bible discloses the reality and truth of Jesus Christ to us. We read the Bible because we want to learn about Jesus—what he said and what he did, who he was and why it matters. The Lord's Prayer is packed with such things. As we spend forty days with Jesus' prayer, we will expect to learn such things, and so find ourselves better equipped to follow him in the way of God. In the Gospel of John, Jesus prayed for his disciples, saying, "And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom

you have sent” (John 17:3). That’s why we read the Bible (and why we are studying the Lord’s Prayer)—to know God and Jesus Christ, and thus to experience an eternal life, which begins now and continues in eternity.

SCRIPTURE INTERPRETS SCRIPTURE

There are many passages in scripture that are fairly easy to understand and others that are rather difficult.

Lutherans believe that difficult passages of scripture are to be interpreted in light of those passages that are more readily understandable, and that all of scripture is to be interpreted in light of the Bible’s central themes and motifs.³

The Lord’s Prayer is packed with words that represent the Bible’s central themes and motifs—the name of God, the kingdom of God, the will of God, the provision of “bread,” forgiveness, rescue, and deliverance. As we move through the prayer, we will use other passages of scripture to help unpack these themes. You will notice many biblical references in the daily readings; follow those back to the pages of the Bible and ask yourself how they help to interpret the Lord’s Prayer.

THE PLAIN MEANING OF THE TEXT

It can be awfully tempting to read meanings into a biblical text that just don’t seem to be there. This can be (1) a ploy to avoid what God is saying to us in the text, or (2) a ploy to substitute what *we* want to say for what God is saying. In either case we have left a conversation with God’s Word and are talking only to ourselves.

Lutherans have always believed that the plain meaning of the text—what it actually says, and how it was understood by the people who heard it first—is critical to understanding what it means in our context. This requires some work because it is not easy to hear in the twenty-first century how a text was heard in the first century. In this little book on the Lord’s Prayer, most of that work has been done for you. In the years ahead, however, as you continue to engage God’s Word in conversation, I encourage you to read Bible commentaries (especially social science commentaries), Bible dictionaries, Jesus studies, histories, and the

like. There are many written for laypeople that will fine tune your ear for hearing how the Bible was heard by those who heard it first—a strong clue as to how it should be heard by us.

PUBLIC INTERPRETATION

Our book of faith—the Bible—is a public, not a private, document. That means that the interpretation of the Bible is also public and any personal understanding or application of the Bible must be done in light of what the Bible has come to mean in the larger community of faith. For this reason, you are encouraged to take this Lenten journey with the Lord's Prayer in a small group or with a spiritual friend—and you are encouraged to talk about your developing understanding of the Lord's Prayer with others in your community of faith. Lutherans try to follow Paul's advice: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom" (Colossians 3:16).

LUTHERANS READ THE BIBLE WITH EXPECTANCY

In the pages of God's Word we expect to find both what God wants for us and what God wants from us (and we are delighted to discover that what God wants for us is precisely what God wants from us!). We expect to be challenged—and we are. We expect to be comforted, graced, empowered, saved—and we are. We expect to be judged—and we are. We expect to be forgiven and are delighted to discover that God's forgiveness goes far beyond our expectations.

A word about method

There are many ways to read the Bible. For example, it can be read devotionally, it can be read historically, it can be read as literature, it can be read in the light of Lutheran theology.⁴ This book is essentially a devotional reading of the Lord's Prayer. The questions and journaling suggestions that accompany each day's readings are designed to help you enter the Lord's Prayer devotionally and meditate on its meaning for your own life of faith as well as for the life of your faith community.

The daily meditations along with the questions and journaling suggestions make this a fairly directed devotional experience. For those who have not spent much time in developing the habits and skills of devotional reading, the

direction provided here should prove helpful. As you continue to open the Bible in the future, however, I encourage you to just sit with the Bible, pray for the Spirit's guidance, begin to read, and ask questions of the text that come from your own life and experience.

May your Lenten journey with the Lord's Prayer be an adventure that leads you to Easter and beyond in the grace of God.

Henry F. French