

# book *of* faith Lenten Journey

40 Days with the Lord's Prayer

Henry F. French



BOOK OF FAITH LENTEN JOURNEY

40 Days with the Lord's Prayer

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Book of faith is an initiative of the  
**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**  
God's work. Our hands.

Cover design: Diana Running

Interior design: Ivy Palmer Skrade

This book was typeset using Dolly and Omnes.

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

French, Henry F.

Book of faith Lenten journey : 40 days with the Lord's prayer / Henry F. French.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-8066-8069-9 (alk. paper)

1. Lord's prayer—Meditations. 2. Lent—Meditations. I. Title.

BV230.F73 2009

226.9'6077—dc22

2008044342

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

Manufactured in the U.S.A.

13 12 11 10 09 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

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## Preface

At its churchwide assembly in 2007, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America affirmed the centrality of the Bible to Christian life and faith while at the same time recognizing the reality of biblical illiteracy in the church. The result is the Book of Faith initiative—a five-year program with “the goal of raising to a new level this church’s individual and collective engagement with the Bible and its teaching, yielding greater biblical fluency and a more profound appreciation of Lutheran principles and approaches for the use of Scripture.” *Book of Faith Lenten Journey: 40 Days with the Lord’s Prayer* is one of many resources being prepared to accomplish this goal.

According to the Book of Faith Initiative’s Web site, [www.bookoffaith.org](http://www.bookoffaith.org):

The Book of Faith initiative invites the whole church to become more fluent in the first language of faith, the language of Scripture, in order that we might live into our calling as a people renewed, enlivened, empowered and sent by the Word.

The Bible is the written Word of God that creates and nurtures faith through the work of the Holy Spirit and points us to Christ, the incarnate Word and center of our faith. The Bible invites us into a relationship with God, making demands on our lives and promising us life in Christ. The Bible tells the stories of people living their faith over the centuries and, through its demands and promises, forms us as a people of faith.

The language of the Bible becomes our language. It shapes how we think and speak about God, about the world, and about ourselves. We become renewed, enlivened, and empowered as the language of Scripture forms our hearts, our minds, our community conversation, and our commitments.

*Book of Faith Lenten Journey: 40 Days with the Lord's Prayer* is designed to engage readers during the season of Lent with the prayer Jesus taught, a prayer that “invites us into a relationship with God, making demands on our lives and promising us life in Christ.” This book is designed to be used alone by individuals or together with a spiritual friend or small group. It can readily be used as a resource for the entire congregation during Lent—worship helps and sermon starters related to the book for Sundays and Wednesday evenings in Lent are available online at [bookoffaith.org](http://bookoffaith.org).

Be sure to visit the Book of Faith Web site regularly for more resources designed to bring the book of faith and the community of faith closer together.



## 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?”<sup>1</sup>

## 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.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup> 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*



## *How to Use this Book*

Your forty-day Lenten journey with the Lord's Prayer gives you an opportunity to learn from Jesus what it means to follow him in the way of God. It is an invitation to ponder what God has to say to us in the teaching and example of Jesus, an invitation to learn, and—in the grace of God—to live what you learn.

You will probably benefit most by fixing a special time of day in which to spend time with this book and your Bible. It is easier—especially in the beginning—to maintain a spiritual practice if you do it regularly at the same time. For many people mornings, while the house is still quiet and before the busyness of the day begins, is a good time. Others will find that the noon hour or before bedtime serves well. We are all unique. Some of us are “morning people” and some of us are not. Do whatever works *for you* to maintain a regular, daily encounter with the Lord's Prayer.

You will note that there are no readings for Sunday. The forty days of Lent traditionally exclude Sundays, the day we celebrate the resurrection of Christ.

Although this book is designed to be used during the forty days of Lent, it can be used at any time of the year. If you pick some time other than Lent for your journey with the Lord's prayer, it would still be best if you complete the journey in forty days. A deepening focus and intensity of experience will be the result. However, it is certainly better to complete the journey than to give it up because you can't get it done in forty days. Indeed, making it a forty- or twenty-week journey may better fit your schedule, and it just might be that spending a whole week, or perhaps half a week, rather than a day, reflecting on each reading, the scripture, and the prayers, and then practicing what you are learning, could be a powerfully transforming experience as well. Set a schedule that works for you, only be consistent. I suggest that you buy a notebook and, as you work your way through this book, take notes. Jot down questions and insights, new ideas, and suggestions for changes in your life of faith that occur to you.

Each day of the journey begins with a brief meditation on one of the petitions in the Lord's Prayer. The meditations tend to build on each other as they introduce you to the key ideas in Jesus' prayer. They are meant to be suggestive, not exhaustive, to stimulate your own thinking and meditation. Read slowly, letting the words sink into your consciousness. You may want to read each meditation two or three times before moving on, perhaps reading it out loud once.

Following the daily meditation, you will find the heading Biblical Wisdom and a brief passage from the Bible that relates directly to the meditation. Read the biblical text slowly (with your notebook at hand), letting the words sink into your consciousness.

After the biblical reading, you will find the heading Theological Thoughts. These are brief nuggets of insight from other biblical scholars and theologians that I have chosen to help focus the theme of the day.

Next comes the heading Silence for Meditation. Here you should spend anywhere from five to twenty minutes meditating on the readings. Begin by getting centered. Sit with your back straight, eyes closed, hands folded in your lap, and breathe slowly and deeply. Remember that breath is a gift of God, the gift of life. Do nothing for two or three minutes other than simply observe your breath. Focus your awareness on the end of your nose. Feel the breath (life) enter through your nostrils and leave through your nostrils.

Once you feel your mind and spirit settling down, open your eyes and read the daily meditation, the biblical text, and the theological nugget again. Read them slowly, focus on each word or phrase, savor them, explore possible meanings and implications. As you meditate on these readings, jot down any insights that occur to you. Do the readings raise any questions for you? Write them down. Do the readings suggest anything you should do? Write it down.

Stay at it as long as it feels useful. When your mind is ready to move on, close your eyes and observe your breath for a minute or so, offer a prayer thanking God for the gift of life and the gift of God's Word, and then return to the book.

The next heading is Questions to Ponder. Here you will find a few pointed questions on the day's readings. These are *general* questions intended for all spiritual seekers and faith communities. Think them through and write your answers (and the implications of your answers for both your own life of faith and your community of faith) in your notebook.

Many of these Questions to Ponder are designed to remind us—as Jesus would affirm—that although spirituality is always personal, it is simultaneously relational and communal. A number of the questions, therefore, apply the relevance of the day’s readings to faith communities. Just remember, a faith community may be as large as a regular organized gathering or as small as a family, or the relationship between spiritual friends. Answer the questions in the context of your particular faith community.

Then move on to the heading Psalm Fragment. Here you will find a brief verse or two from the Hebrew book of Psalms that relates to the day’s readings. The Psalms have always been the mainstay of prayer in the Christian tradition and always speak to the real situations in which we find ourselves.

Reflect for a moment on the Psalm Fragment and then continue on to the heading Journal Reflections. Several suggestions for journaling are given that apply the readings to your own personal experience. It is in journaling that the “day” reaches its climax and the potential for transformative change is greatest. It would be best to buy a separate journal rather than use your notebook. For a journal you can use another spiral-bound or ring-bound notebook or one of the hardcover journal books sold in stationery stores. Below you will find some suggestions for how to keep a journal. For now, let’s go back to the daily format.

The Questions to Ponder and Journal Reflections exercises are meant to assist you in reflecting on the daily readings and scripture quotations. Do not feel that you have to answer every question. You may choose which questions or exercises are most helpful to you. Sometimes a perfectly appropriate response to a question is “I don’t know” or “I’m not sure what I think about that.” The important thing is to record your own thoughts and questions.

After Journal Reflections, you will find one more heading (two on Saturdays). In Worship Hints for Tomorrow, on Saturdays, you will find some suggestions drawn from our study of the Lord’s Prayer that will help you see the implications of the prayer for Sunday worship. The last heading is Prayer for Today, a one- or two-line prayer to end your session and to be prayed from time to time throughout the day.

## *Hints on Keeping a Journal*

A journal is a very helpful tool.<sup>5</sup> Keeping a journal is a form of meditation, a profound way of getting to know yourself—and God—more deeply. Although you could read *Book of Faith Lenten Journey* and simply reflect on it “in your head,” writing can help you focus your thoughts, clarify your thinking, and keep a record of your insights, questions, and prayers. Writing is generative: it enables you to have thoughts you would not otherwise have had.

### **A few hints for journaling**

1. Write in your journal with grace. Don't get stuck in trying to do it perfectly. Just write freely. Don't worry about literary style, spelling, or grammar. Your goal is simply to generate thoughts pertinent to your own life and get them down on paper.
2. You may want to begin and end your journaling with prayer. Ask for the guidance and wisdom of the Spirit (and thank God for that guidance and wisdom when you are done).
3. If your journaling takes you in directions that go beyond the journaling questions in this book, go there. Let the questions encourage, not limit, your writing.
4. Respond honestly. Don't write what you think you're supposed to believe. Write down what you really do believe, in so far as you can identify that. If you don't know, or are not sure, or if you have questions, record those. Questions are often openings to spiritual growth.
5. Carry this book, your notebook, and journal around with you every day during your journey (only keep them safe from prying eyes). Your Lenten journey with the Lord's Prayer is an intense experience that doesn't stop when you close the book. Your mind and heart and spirit will be engaged all day, and it will be helpful to have your book, notebook, and journal handy to take notes or make new entries as they occur to you.



## *Journeying with Others*

You can use this book (and I hope you do) with another person, a spiritual friend or partner, or with a small group. It would be best for each person to first do his or her own reading, reflection, and writing in solitude. Then when you come together, share the insights you have gained from your time alone. Your discussion will probably focus on the Questions to Ponder; however, if you are working through the book with people you trust, you may feel comfortable sharing some of what you have written in your journal. No one, however, should ever be pressured to share anything in their journal if they are not comfortable doing so. It should also be a ground rule that whatever gets said in a small group stays in the group. A commitment to confidentiality will help everyone risk openness in this journey with Jesus' prayer.

Remember that your goal is to learn from one another, not to argue, nor to prove that you are right and the other person wrong. Just practice listening and trying to understand why your partner, friend, or colleague thinks as he or she does.

As those in your group all work to translate insight into action, sharing your experiences with each other is a way of encouraging and guiding each other, and provides the opportunity to provide feedback to each other—gently—if that becomes necessary.

Practicing intercessory prayer together, you will find, will strengthen the spiritual bonds of those who take the journey together. I would encourage you to spend a few moments sharing prayer requests around the theme of the day and then praying for each other and your faith community before you bring your time together to a close.



## *Journey Week One*

### Day 1—Ash Wednesday

*Lord, teach us to pray.*

*Pray then in this way...*

### Days 2–6

*Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name...*



## Journey

### Day One—Ash Wednesday

*He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray.”*

Luke 11:1

*Pray then in this way . . .*

Matthew 6:9a

Jesus would often go off to some lonely place to pray, sometimes alone and sometimes with his disciples. Clearly Jesus needed times away from the crowds who clamored for his attention—and he thought his disciples needed to get away from it all from time to time as well.

He (and they) needed time when his attention could be completely on God, on his relationship with God, time to speak and time to listen, time to rest in the love of the one who sent him into the world for love of the world. Clearly Jesus needed the encouragement, the strengthening, the empowerment that comes from encounters with God in deep, intentional times of prayer. If he needed to pray, how much more do we?

But, not only do we need to pray—many if not most of us *want* to pray. If we stop for a moment, step aside from the many distractions of our lives, and look deep within, we find a longing to connect with God. We yearn for intimacy with the divine, the holy, the one whom Jesus called “Father.” And so, we too ask, “Lord, teach us to pray.”

And the request is answered. Jesus responds, “Pray then in this way,” and then he teaches what we call the Lord’s Prayer—words repeated so often for so long that they may have lost their edge for us. Many of us have become numb to their meaning, insensitive to the radical nature of this ancient and yet modern prayer.

“Pray then in this way . . .” These are not words of friendly advice from a gentle wisdom figure encouraging us to develop our own personal piety. Rather

they are words of *command* spoken to people who have been *chosen* to follow Jesus in God's mission and who have freely accepted that remarkable calling. We lose the full force and effect of this prayer if we do not hear the words "Pray then in this way" as marching orders for people *chosen* for the mission of God—the mission of bringing justice and love, forgiveness and redemption into the world's sin and suffering and death.

*Biblical Wisdom*

*Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.*

Matthew 7:7

*Theological Thoughts*

The reality encompassed in the Lord's Prayer is not a pretty picture but one of heavy conflict. . . . The prayer that our Lord taught us cannot be prayed in just any way and with just any attitude. It presupposes a perception of this world's tragedy.<sup>6</sup>

*Silence For Meditation*

*Questions to Ponder*

- What place should the teaching of prayer have in a community of faith?
- What are some of the distractions that numb our longing for God and keep us from prayer?
- Recall what was said about law and gospel in the introduction. In what way might Jesus' command "Pray then in this way" be experienced as law? As gospel?

*Psalm Fragment*

*As a deer longs for flowing streams,  
so my soul longs for you, O God.*

Psalm 42:1

### *Journal Reflections*

- Write about the place and practice of prayer in your life of faith right now as you begin this journey with the Lord's Prayer.
- In what (if any) ways does today's Psalm Fragment reflect your feelings?
- In your journal, write down your goals for this forty-day journey with the Lord's Prayer.

### *Prayer for Today*

Jesus, teach me to pray, and grant me the faith and courage not only to pray but to follow you in the way of God. Amen.

## Journey

### Day 2—Thursday

*Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name...*

When reading the Bible, it is common to focus on paragraphs, whole sentences, phrases, big words. Little words often get lost in the rush to understand. That's too bad; the meaning of a long sentence often hinges on the meaning of small words—prepositions, pronouns, adjectives. It's like cooking, where the slightest dash of spice can enhance the flavor of the whole dish.

When reading the Bible in a devotional way, don't ignore the little words. Savor each word as if it were the main course. Let each word have its own moment in your consciousness, a moment to suggest associations, to evoke insights, to raise questions. Be like the prophet Jeremiah who (metaphorically, of course) declared to God, "Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart" (Jeremiah 15:16).

Today we want to savor one little word—*our*. *Our* is the possessive form of the pronoun *we*. It implies something in common, as in, "We went to Europe for a week but *our* flight was delayed, *our* baggage got lost, *our* accommodations were terrible, *our* food was awful, we both got sick, and *our* trip was ruined!" Two or more people with a common experience, a common possession, a common

hope, a common fear, a common joy, a common sorrow. Two or more people standing in solidarity with each other. Two or more people somehow bound together. All of this is contained in the word *our*.

“Our Father . . .” If God is *our* Father, then God is not only *my* Father. We share a Father. We are part of something larger than ourselves—a family, as it were. If God is *our* Father, then *all* other people are, in a profound sense, our sisters and brothers. We belong to and are responsible for each other. You will notice that there are no first person pronouns in this prayer. In no way is the Lord’s Prayer ever *my* prayer. It is always *our* prayer, and whenever we pray it our attention should turn not only to our own needs but also to the needs of others.

We never pray this prayer alone. Whenever we pray these words we stand with every other person—whether they pray this prayer or not.

#### *Biblical Wisdom*

*[There is] one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.*

Ephesians 4:6

#### *Theological Thoughts*

The Lord’s Prayer is emphatically a *we* prayer, a prayer that we utter as members of the people of God rather than as isolated individuals. We pray as a community and on behalf of all humanity and, indeed, all creatures. Not a trace of individualism is in this prayer.<sup>7</sup>

#### *Silence for Meditation*

#### *Questions to Ponder*

- How do you generally experience the church—as a true community or as a collection of relatively “isolated individuals”? Explain.
- In what activities or programs of your faith community do you most experience a sense of commonality, connection, and true closeness with others? In what programs or activities do you feel unconnected, separate, or even isolated from others? Why the difference?

- What does the recognition that God is not just *my* Father but *our* Father imply about God's (and the church's) mission in the world?

*Psalm Fragment*

*How very good and pleasant it is  
when kindred live together in unity!*  
Psalm 133:1

*Journal Reflections*

- Write about the difference between praying “Our Father” and “My Father.”
- Reread the text from Ephesians above. How does knowing that God is “above all and through all and in all” change your view of the world and other people?
- Do you agree that “whenever we pray these words we stand with every other person—whether they pray this prayer or not”? Why or why not? If true, what are the implications?

*Prayer for Today*

Loving God, open my eyes that I may see other people as your children—loved by you as much as I am loved by you. Amen.

## Journey

### Day 3—Friday

*Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name...*

Today we focus on one of the big words—*Father*. In the Old Testament, it is not uncommon to find God referred to as the father of Israel, that is, as the God who established Israel as his own special people (for example, Deuteronomy 32:6). It is, however, somewhat unusual to find *father* used as a term of personal address to God in the way Jesus used it. Clearly Jesus' relationship with God was both interpersonal and intimate, and the wonder is that by teaching his followers this prayer, he invites us into an equally personal and intimate relationship with God.

Jesus' world was distinctly patriarchal and his religion was distinctly Jewish. Although you can find feminine images of God in the Old Testament (for example, Isaiah 66:13), if Jesus had called God "Mother" instead of "Father," I suspect no one would have taken him seriously.

But can we call God "Mother"? In our world of domestic and sexual abuse, broken homes, and absent fathers, the word *father* can have deeply negative meanings for many people, meanings that keep them from experiencing the deeply interpersonal intimacy and love that moved Jesus to call God "Father" and to teach his followers to do the same. If calling God "Mother" opens a wounded soul to the experience of divine love, then why not?

After all, God is neither male nor female, but completely transcends such gender distinctions. The words *father* and *mother* both make the point Jesus was making when he taught his followers to pray "Our Father." We are dependent upon God as a child to a parent. We are to obey God as a child obeys a parent, trusting that whatever God asks of us will be good for us. We are to respect and love God as a child respects and loves a parent, when the parental relationship is grounded in love and care for the child.

When we pray "Our Father," we address our divine parent and stand firmly within the circle of God's love and care.

*Biblical Wisdom*

*Yet, O LORD, you are our Father;  
we are the clay, and you are our potter;  
we are all the work of your hand.*

Isaiah 64:8

*Theological Thoughts*

What is intended by the analogy of the father-child relationship? It is the recognition of the plain fact that we did not put ourselves on earth but that we find ourselves here as a result of someone else's will and action. This relationship cannot be altered or terminated. Even an explicit abrogation of the relationship by the created being cannot change the facts of life.<sup>8</sup>

*Silence for Meditation*

*Questions to Ponder*

- Recall what was said in the introduction about reading the Bible expectantly. What might Jesus' invitation to call God "Father" lead you to expect?
- How might calling God "Father" challenge the way you experience your life and relationships?
- Are the words "Our Father" words of law or words of gospel for you? Why?

*Psalm Fragment*

*For it was you who formed my inward parts;  
you knit me together in my mother's womb.  
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.*  
Psalm 139:13-14a

*Journal Reflections*

- Write a short meditation on what it means to you to call God "Father" or "Mother."
- Make a list of other images of God that speak to your understanding and experience of God.
- Reflect on Psalm 139 above. Write your own prayer expressing what it means to you to be a creature placed on this beautiful blue-green planet by a loving God.

*Prayer for Today*

Holy God, Father and Mother, thank you for the steadfastness of your love this day and every day. Amen.

## Journey

### Day 4—Saturday

*Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name . . .*

Although Jesus invites us into a deeply personal and intimate relationship with God, he does not invite us to domesticate God, a temptation that is all too easy to fall into. A domesticated god is a tribal god, a god who serves to sanction the political, economic, social, and individual agendas of those who have essentially created a god in their own image. A domesticated god is a safe god—one who asks nothing of us that we don't want to be asked. A domesticated god is a small god, reflecting the pettiness and serving the greed and ambition of people for whom god is a tool or weapon to be wielded in self-interest.

But God is not a tribal god wedded to the particular interests of particular people—God is the creator of all that is, a transcendent God, a God to stand in awe of, a God clothed in mystery. God cannot be contained in any ideology or even theology, nor can God be manipulated by human plans and designs. And so, to prevent any attempt to house-train God, Jesus tells us to pray to “Our Father *in heaven*.”

Those words, “in heaven,” insist upon the awe and wonder that is appropriate for the creature in the presence of the creator. Although God is closer to us than we are to ourselves—in God “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28)—God is *in heaven*. Which is a way of saying, “Yes, God is our Father, but *do not take the relationship for granted!*” When we pray this prayer, we might do well to remember Psalm 46:10: “Be still, and know that I am God!”

The paradox of God's immanence and transcendence is most profoundly expressed in the two creation stories in Genesis. In Genesis 1, God speaks and creation is called into being. With a word, sun and moon and stars are flung into space, the oceans, the forests, the prairies are populated. With a word, men and women are created in the very image of God. Here God is completely transcendent, all powerful, wholly Other—a God *in heaven*.

In Genesis 2, however, God creates not with a word but with hands. God plants a garden, fashions Adam from the dust of the earth, and breathes the



breath of life into his nostrils. God fashions all the animals as a potter works with clay, and creates a woman to be with Adam from Adam's rib. God walks through the garden in the evening breeze calling for Adam. This is a hands-on God, immanent and intimate, connected and caring. A God who can be approached. A *Father/Mother God*.

The Hebrew storytellers were wise. God is our Father—and God is in heaven.

*Biblical Wisdom*

*For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.*

2 Corinthians 4:6

*Theological Thoughts*

Precisely because the ability to call God "Father" has become so devalued today, it is imperative that we hear the early Christian community telling us that [God] is "in heaven."<sup>9</sup>

*Silence for Meditation*

*Questions to Ponder*

- In your faith community, in what ways is God's transcendence emphasized? God's immanence? Is it a good balance? Why or why not?
- What is lost when the sense of God's transcendence is lost? When the sense of God's immanence is lost?
- Give examples of the human attempt to domesticate God within our culture.

*Psalm Fragment*

*When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars that you have established;  
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,  
mortals that you care for them?*

Psalm 8:3-4

*Journal Reflections*

- Write a reflection on the ways in which you personally experience God's transcendence.
- Write a reflection on the ways in which you personally experience God's immanence.
- What does it mean to you to say that "In [God] we live and move and have our being"?

*Worship Hints for Tomorrow*

- Just before the congregation prays the Lord's Prayer together, in the silence of your heart ask Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray."
- When you "pass the peace," look at each person and think to yourself, "This is my brother. This is my sister." Reflect on the experience later in the day.

*Prayer for Today*

*Our Father in heaven, do not let me lose either the sense of awe in your transcendence or the comfort of your immanence. Amen.*

## Journey

### Day 5—Monday

*Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name . . .*

And now we come to the first of seven petitions in the Lord's Prayer—"hallowed be your name." According to the form of the Greek verbs, in this petition and the two that follow, we are asking God to act in ways that God should act, and we are asking God to enable us to act in ways we should act. "God, *you* make your name holy—and enable *us* to make your name holy in all we do." "God, *you* make your righteous kingdom come—and enable *us* to be agents of your coming kingdom in all we do." "God, *you* cause your will to be done on earth as in heaven—and enable *us* to do your will as well." We are bold to ask God to act in ways that

vindicate God's righteousness; we are bold to ask God to enable us to act in ways that express God's righteousness.

It takes a bit of chutzpah to do this! To remind God that the hallowing of God's name, the coming of God's kingdom, and the doing of God's will is *first* God's responsibility and *second* ours seems a bit uppity coming from the creature to the creator, the child to the Father in heaven. Perhaps that is why on Sunday, the pastor often reminds us that we should "pray with confidence in the words our Savior taught us." Our confidence and boldness come from Jesus' telling us that it's okay to speak with God in this way.

To pray these first three petitions of the Lord's Prayer is risky because it expresses our commitment to serve God's purposes, our willingness to be used by God in bringing love, justice, compassion, forgiveness, mercy, peace, and hope to our hurting and hurtful world. When we live this way, we hallow God's name. It is risky business because the forces of darkness that stand against God will stand against those who stand with God. This is not a prayer for the faint of heart. As Jesus reminds us, God's name(s) are not made holy by simply repeating them. "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven" (Matthew 7:21).

Those who pray this prayer with a deep awareness of what they are doing go to church. They hallow God's name in worship, and receive from God and each other the faith, wisdom, strength, and courage to hallow God's name out in the world where they live and work and play.

### *Biblical Wisdom*

*Why do you call me "Lord, Lord," and do not do what I tell you?*

Luke 6:46

### *Theological Thoughts*

[God's name is hallowed] whenever the Word of God is taught clearly and purely and we, as God's children, also live holy lives according to it. To this end help us, dear Father in heaven! However, whoever teaches and lives otherwise than the Word of God teaches profanes the name of God among us. Preserve us from this, heavenly Father!<sup>10</sup>

*Silence for Meditation*

*Questions to Ponder*

- What changes might we expect to find in our society if God's name were truly hallowed?
- In our culture, is God's name profaned more than it is made holy? Explain.
- What evidence do you see of God's name being made holy? Of being profaned?

*Psalm Fragment*

Teach me to do your will,  
for you are my God.  
Let your good spirit lead me  
on a level path.  
Psalm 143:10

*Journal Reflections*

- In Leviticus 19:2, God tells the people, "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy." Write a short meditation on what this means to you.
- Have you ever experienced praying the Lord's Prayer as a "risky business"? Explain.
- Describe in your journal times, places, and activities when you have felt the holiness of God.

*Prayer for Today*

Holy God, may the way I live today, what I say and what I do, mirror your holiness. Amen.

## Journey

### Day 6—Tuesday

*Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name...*

God is called by many names in the Old Testament, but they are largely descriptive rather than personal: “Marvelous,” “Strong One of Jacob,” “He of the Mountain,” “Mighty One,” “Rock,” “Refuge,” “King.” It is interesting to read through the Old Testament and make note of the many adjectives, nouns, and images used to attempt to name that which the human mind cannot fully grasp. Given the limitations of human understanding, if God does not disclose God’s name, it will not be known.

According to the book of Exodus, God did exactly that—disclosed God’s name to Moses before sending him to Egypt to liberate the Hebrew slaves from captivity. When Moses asked God what to tell the Hebrews when they asked who sent him to them, God replied “Yahweh,” which can be translated as I AM WHO I AM, OR I AM WHAT I AM, OR I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE, or simply, I AM (Exodus 3:13-15). It is a strange name, hardly a name at all, but one that should evoke a sense of healthy fear. It declares that God IS in a way that humans are not, and God should thus be taken with great seriousness.

In ancient Israel, the name of God was considered so holy that it was not to be spoken or written. Instead of writing *Yahweh*, the writers of the Bible wrote only the four consonants in the name, YHWH, a sign to the reader that, rather than pronounce the holy name, they should read the word as either *Adonai* (Lord) or *Elohim* (God). The convention continues today. When you read your Bible and find LORD or GOD in all capital letters, it is a sign that the Hebrew text has YHWH representing *Yahweh*, the holy name of God.

The Lord’s Prayer is an invitation to ponder the sacred, to wonder about I AM, the mystery from which we came and to which we shall return.

When God disclosed God’s name to Moses, God spoke from a burning bush. As Moses approached the bush, he was told to take off his shoes because the ground on which he stood was holy ground. With reference to this event, the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote: “Earth’s crammed with heaven, / And every common bush afire with God: / But only he who sees, takes off his

shoes, / The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.” We—especially people of Christian faith—should all be running around barefoot. Sadly, too many of us have blackberry juice running down our chins. *Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.*

*Biblical Wisdom*

*I am the LORD, that is my name.*

Isaiah 42:8

*Theological Thoughts*

The problem with the Lord’s Prayer is neither in its content nor its historicity, but its familiarity. Many congregants don’t actually think of the meaning of the words or, if they do, find only comfort rather than a challenge.<sup>11</sup>

*Silence for Meditation*

*Questions to Ponder*

- How might a community of faith help promote a sense of the sacredness of God’s name?
- It might seem strange to think that God’s name is not God, it is Yahweh. Would it make any difference to you to think of God as Yahweh (I AM) instead of as “God” or “Lord”? Explain.
- The Second Commandment tells us that we are not to misuse the name of God. In what ways is the name of God commonly misused in our world?

*Psalm Fragment*

*And those who know your name put their trust in you,*

*for you, O LORD, have not forsaken those who seek you.*

Psalm 9:10

*Journal Reflections*

- Write a short meditation titled “Making God’s Name Holy.”
- Write a brief prayer to Yahweh that expresses your sense of wonder at the relationship between Yahweh and humankind.

- In your day-to-day life, do you often run around “barefoot” or more often find “blackberry juice” running down your chin? Explain.

*Prayer for Today*

Holy God, enable me to see that all ground is holy ground for you are always with us. Amen.