

Jan/Feb 2021

Today

refresh, refocus, renew

DISCOVERING
JESUS

ALSO: LORD, TEACH US TO PRAY

Dear Friends:

Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Mark, a follower of Jesus Christ, jotted down many important episodes of Jesus' life and ministry. This collection of stories became known as the good news (gospel) account of Mark that we have in our Bibles today. Later some other Christ-followers—Matthew, Luke, and John—were led by the Spirit to share more of Jesus' story and his teachings. Together, these gospel accounts reveal a faith-filled, surprising, and inspiring picture of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.



In January, Pastor Doug MacLeod invites us to look closely at the book of Mark. From the opening words, "The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God . . ." we meet Jesus and begin to discover who he is and why he came. With vivid details and a fast-paced style, Mark tells the basic story of the one Savior who can rescue us from sin and death.

In February, I have the privilege of exploring the Bible's teachings on prayer, focusing mainly on the Lord's Prayer. In this key prayer Jesus teaches why we should pray, how we should pray, and what we should pray for. In writing these meditations, I learned a lot about prayer—and I trust that you will too as you draw near to "our Father in heaven," who wants all of us to be his children.

May God's Word refresh, refocus, and renew you each day!

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Kurt Selles". The signature is fluid and stylized, with a long horizontal line extending from the end.

—Kurt Selles

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"Discovering Jesus"
Douglas MacLeod



"Lord, Teach Us to Pray"
Kurt Selles

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ReFrame
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Lord, Teach Us to Pray

Kurt Selles

One day a follower of Jesus asked him, “Lord, teach us to pray . . .” (Luke 11:1). And Jesus responded with a brief, easy-to-learn prayer that has become known as the Lord’s Prayer.

This beautiful prayer has become a favorite of Jesus’ followers throughout the centuries. It gives us a sort of template for one of the most significant things we do as Christians: *praying*. For when we pray, we acknowledge our total dependence on God as our heavenly Father, our thanksgiving to God, and our call to love and serve God in all the areas of our lives.

This month’s devotions look at prayer in general and the Lord’s Prayer in particular. My prayer is that our focusing on prayer this month will spark in each of us a deep commitment and passion for communicating with our heavenly Father and for loving and serving him every day.

Kurt Selles is the director of ReFrame Ministries, which publishes these Today devotions. Kurt is a graduate of Calvin Theological Seminary and Vanderbilt University. Kurt previously served as director of the Global Center at Beeson Divinity School, where he also taught missions. He also served as a missionary in Taiwan and China. Kurt and his wife, Vicki, have three adult children.

LORD, TEACH US TO PRAY

One day, Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray. . . ."

—Luke 11:1

Many of God's people in the Bible show us the importance of prayer. For example, Moses prayed to the Lord to guide and have mercy on his people (Deuteronomy 9:26-29), and Hannah prayed for a son, whom she would dedicate to serve the Lord (1 Samuel 1:11).

Jesus, the Son of God who came to save us from our sins, prayed too. He prayed a lot. The gospel books (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) mention him praying in a variety of settings and situations. Jesus prayed alone in the mountains. He prayed in the evening. He spent whole nights praying. He gave thanks for the food he shared with crowds. He prayed for his followers and for all people to believe in him.

It may surprise us that Jesus prayed. After all, he was the Son of God, so why would he

need to pray? There's certainly mystery here, but Jesus' life of prayer reminds us that prayer is communication with God the Father. Jesus' prayers show us the importance of loving the Father deeply and desiring to please and glorify God. Jesus' prayers highlight our dependence on the Father. They also show that prayer refreshed and renewed him for his ministry.

Seeing Jesus' commitment to prayer, his disciples wanted to learn from him. And whom but Jesus himself could be better to turn to for instruction in prayer?

Lord Jesus, by your example and your passion, teach us to pray. Draw us to grow closer to you, and help us to do your will in the world. Amen.

PRAY IN THE GARAGE

"When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen."
—Matthew 6:6

Do you ever go into your garage, close the door, and pray? I'm not opposed to praying in my garage, but it's not usually the first place that comes to mind when I think about a place to pray.

Yet that's basically what Jesus tells his followers to do here. The word that Jesus uses for the place to pray literally means "storeroom." In Jesus' day storerooms were out-of-the-way spaces that were used mainly for storing tools and supplies, including food, and these rooms usually had a door that could be closed.

Jesus' command makes prayer seem a secretive and private matter. Could that be his point?

In this passage Jesus is teaching his listeners about prayer, fasting, and tithing. These were all vital aspects of the people's religious life, but some of the

people's leaders tended to use these activities as a way to show off how religious and devout they were.

Here Jesus warns against showy prayer. Earnest and honest prayer, he is saying, focuses on God alone. If you're merely satisfied with impressing others, that will be your only reward. But if you want God to hear your prayers, speak only to him.

If your garage isn't the best place for prayer, find another place where you can be alone with God and concentrate on communicating with him. "Then your Father, who sees what's done in secret, will reward you."

Father in heaven, help us to find just the right place to speak with you and to hear your voice. Amen.

KEEP IT SIMPLE

"And when you pray, do not keep on babbling. . . ."

—Matthew 6:7

Some of the best advice for giving a speech is "Keep it simple!" Keeping it simple, according to Jesus, is good advice for prayer as well.

In his teaching in Matthew 6 about prayer, Jesus advises, "Do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words." He was talking here about people who believed in false gods and thought that you needed to make a spectacle with flashy and showy prayers to get the gods' attention. But the true God has no trouble hearing us, and he is attentive to all our needs.

Now, this was not to say that public prayers or even lengthy prayers were a mistake. There were often prayers in public worship, where a leader would speak for all of the people, who prayed together at the same

time. Also, there were often many things to give thanks for and to be concerned about, so it could be appropriate to pray for a long time. Jesus himself did that often.

When we pray, alone or in public, the main thing is to focus all of our attention on the Lord, to whom we are praying. He made the heavens and the earth. He loves us so much that he did not spare his only Son in rescuing us from sin and death. In a simple, heartfelt, direct way, we can share with God all of our thanks and cares. And Jesus promises that our Father will not only hear but also answer our prayers. What could be simpler than that?

Spirit of God, speak in us and through us as we pray to our heavenly Father, who loves us more than we can imagine. Amen.

WHY PRAY?

Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances. . . .
—1 Thessalonians 5:17

As believers, we are taught to pray. But *why* should we pray? Prayer brings us into communion with God, the maker and sustainer of the universe. God gives us life, and he sustains our daily living. We should pray because God has everything we need and wants us to flourish. What's more, we should pray because in prayer we can give thanks to God for all that he is and all that he does.

In prayer we recognize our utter dependence on God. It can be hard to admit that we are completely dependent. But at the same time prayer opens our hearts to more fully experience the breathtaking scope of God's amazing grace and mercy for us.

Thanksgiving in prayer is not just a good idea or a suggestion, though. It's a command, as the apostle Paul reminds us. By rejoicing always and pray-

ing continually, we obey the will of God for us in Christ.

Sometimes we think of commands as a burden. But obeying this command will bless us beyond measure and put us in the best position for loving and serving God in the world.

So when you pray today (and always), spend time communing with God, ask him for whatever you need, and feel the strong rush of his grace and mercy resulting in a sense of gratitude that shapes all you do.

We come before you, Lord, with hearts of thanksgiving for who you are and all you do. Amen.

ASKING FOR THE HOLY SPIRIT

"If you then . . . know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"
—Luke 11:13

I love giving good gifts to my children. If they constantly nagged me for things, though, I would probably tire quickly of their demands. Constant demands quickly feel like unreasonable ones.

So why does God want us to keep asking him for things? Is it because he wants to be in control? No. God is already in control, and he doesn't depend on us to make him feel needed.

No matter what we do or how we do it, we can't coax, cajole, or wheedle God into responding to our prayers. But the good news is that we don't need to do that.

God wants to answer us because he loves us and wants to be in relationship with us. When we pray, we acknowledge who God is and that we depend on him. And God sup-

plies us with all that we need, all that he has promised.

So what should we pray for? We should pray for everything we need and, above all, we should ask for the presence of the Holy Spirit. Having the Spirit of God dwell in our hearts is the greatest gift that God gives to his children.

When you pray today, don't grovel and beg before God. Approach him with thanksgiving and ask for what you need, and above all ask him for the presence, strength, and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Lord, we praise and thank you for always providing and caring for us. Hear our prayer, and send us your Spirit to guide and strengthen us today. Amen.

PRAYING TO THE GOD OF THE BIBLE

The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.
—Psalm 145:18

Many years ago at a university in Beijing, I asked a classroom of about 100 Chinese students to raise their hand if they ever prayed. About 70 percent of them raised their hands.

Broadly defining prayer, many people around the world say that they pray. But we need to ask, “To whom or what do they pray?”

When Christians pray, they are not merely launching wishes out to an impersonal cosmos. Christian prayer speaks to the divine Creator of the universe, the one true God who is the Lord of heaven and earth.

And how do we know this God? Though God has revealed himself in his creation, we can know God personally only through his written Word and through prayer. Consequently, prayer and Bible reading cannot be sepa-

rated. We can't know God as our Father in heaven, or how to live for him and serve him in his world, unless we are immersed in his Word, listening and meditating and communicating with him about the truth we find there.

So we would be wise to take to heart an old Sunday school song that reminds us, “Read your Bible; pray every day.” Of course this isn't some magical formula; it's just sound advice for knowing to whom we pray, how God wants us to pray, and what we should pray for. Praying without God's Word in our hearts puts us at risk of merely “sending wishes.”

Lord, help us to open our Bibles to see who you are so that we can pray to you in spirit and in truth. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

THE POSTURE OF PRAYER

*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love.
... A broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise.*

—Psalm 51:1, 17

What is your posture for praying? Do you close your eyes? Do you fold your hands? Do you get down on your knees? Do you stand up?

Actually, there are many appropriate positions for prayer, and none are necessarily right or wrong. It's the posture of our hearts that really matters in praying.

The Bible teaches that God rejects the proud and the arrogant. But God listens to the prayers of believers who approach him with a humble and contrite heart.

Approaching God with a humble and repentant heart, though, does not imply groveling. Coming before God with meekness, we confess that we have sinned and have fallen short of his glory. Our humility is an appeal for forgiveness. It's an acknowledgment of our

utter need and total dependence. Ultimately, it's a plea that we need Jesus.

Through Jesus' death on the cross, we receive God's grace. So with humility and a contrite spirit, we can boldly enter into God's very presence with our prayers. God does not despise our humble repentance.

So whether you pray standing up, on your knees, seated, with your hands folded, or however you happen to approach God, do so with a humble and contrite heart.

Father, through your Son, Jesus, we come humbly before you, trusting that you hear and answer our prayers. Amen.

IN JESUS' NAME

"You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it."

—John 14:14

Maybe you have heard the expression "It's not what you know; it's *who* you know." This describes an unfair situation when you're applying for a job, but when we're talking about prayer, it's a good thing—even a comfort.

Jesus makes a bold promise to his disciples: "Ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it." This is not some empty claim, however. By declaring his oneness with the Father, Jesus boldly and plainly asserts his own divinity. In other words, as the Lord over all things, he can do whatever he wills, and he will deliver whatever he promises.

Does that really mean we can ask Jesus for anything and he will do it? The short answer is yes, but that does not apply to anything we might wish for; it's not about pleasing ourselves.

Whatever we ask for must be in line with who Jesus is and why he came into the world. Our prayers and requests must relate to Jesus' own purpose and mission: to show God's love and mercy in our hurting world.

And even as we pray in line with his mission, Jesus may not answer our prayers exactly as we wish or within our preferred time frame, but he hears and will respond nonetheless.

So let's take Jesus at his word and ask for anything in his name, doing so in keeping with his own heart and mission. And as we do, we'll be participating in his work in this world.

Jesus, you have promised to hear and answer our prayers. Help us always to pray in keeping with your heart and mission. Amen.

WHEN Y'ALL PRAY

"When you pray, say . . ."

—Luke 11:2

One thing I enjoyed about living in Alabama some years ago was the usefulness and appeal of saying "y'all." This is just a contraction of the phrase "you all," and it works well when you're talking to more than one person at once. It also reminds me of something important about the Lord's Prayer.

When one of his disciples said, "Lord, teach us to pray," Jesus gave them the "Lord's Prayer" as a magnificent template for prayer to their Father in heaven. And he introduced it by saying (with the plural form of *you*), "When you [all] pray . . ." So even though the Lord's Prayer can be a deeply personal prayer, it's chiefly a prayer that Jesus taught his followers to say together.

Since the earliest days of the church, Christians have used the Lord's Prayer for worship and prayer. After all, Jesus has

taught us these words, and they capture the essence of Jesus' gospel: God, the maker of heaven and earth, loves us and wants to provide for our every physical and spiritual need.

When we say these words alone or together, they should remind us that God loves us. They should remind us that we stand not alone but as Christ's body around the world, saying the same prayer in many different languages. And yet, with one voice, we recite Jesus' words and celebrate God's love and care for us always.

So, when y'all pray today, give thanks for this prayer Jesus has given to *us*.

Lord, you have taught us to pray; help us to keep praying together in all situations, for your sake. Amen.

OUR FATHER

"This then is how you should pray, 'Our Father . . .'"

—Matthew 6:9

Did you know there's a difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament understandings of God as Father? The Hebrews (in the Old Testament) thought of God as *like* a father. The New Testament teaches that God *is* our Father.

The Hebrew Scriptures use many images depicting God's love and care for his people. Among them, these images include "father," "shepherd," "mother," "rock," and "fortress." In the New Testament, though, Jesus tells his followers that God is their Father.

"But wait a minute," you might say; "don't we confess that Jesus alone is the Son of God?" Yes, but by God's grace and through Jesus' sacrifice for us, we have been adopted as God's children, with all of the rights and privileges of belonging to God's family. Being chil-

dren of God provides us with abundant comfort in our daily lives.

Jesus shows us that being God's children has tremendous implications for our prayers too. When we begin to pray, we should say, "Our Father," because remembering that God is our Father awakens in us a childlike awe and trust—and this assures us that he hears and answers our prayers and provides just what we need.

Our Father, we come as your children, believing and trusting that you will provide for our every need. We do this through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who gave us the right to become your children. Amen.

IN HEAVEN

"The God who made the earth and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands."
—Acts 17:24

Where is heaven? We aren't told. But Jesus promises to bring us there. And one day we will live with God forever in the new heaven and new earth (Revelation 21:1-5).

When we pray with Jesus, "Our Father in heaven" (Matthew 6:9), we confess the awesome greatness and power of God. We assert, as the Bible does, that God rules the cosmos. He created the universe. He rules over all the earth, from the smallest nation to the grandest empire. And we rightfully bow before God in worship.

God reigns—and this should give us great comfort. He's not like a "Wizard of Oz" pretending to be someone in charge. And he didn't simply wind up the universe like a clock and then leave it to tick on its own. God really can and does actively govern everything that

happens in our world, including all that happens to each of us.

Because of who God is, when we pray to our Father in heaven, we can be assured that he hears and answers our prayers. By his knowledge and power and in his timing, God promises to give us just what we need. So we trust in him to provide for us.

When you pray today to our Father in heaven, trust that the one who rules and sustains the universe can and will hear and answer your prayers.

Our Father in heaven, maker of heaven and earth, we worship and adore you. Thank you for loving us and answering our prayers. Amen.

HALLOWED BE YOUR NAME

My mouth will speak in praise of the LORD. Let every creature praise his holy name for ever and ever.

—Psalm 145:21

With the words “hallowed be your name,” Jesus introduces the first petition, or request, of the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:9). The first half of this prayer makes requests that focus on glory and honor to God, and the second half focuses on our needs as God’s people. Being the first request, “hallowed be your name” is the most weighty of all the petitions in this prayer.

We don’t use the word *hallowed* very often today. So what is this petition asking for? A more current wording could be “May your name be holy” or “May your name be honored and praised.”

In this appeal, we ask God to show the world who he is—to reveal his almighty power, wisdom, kindness, justice, mercy, and truth. We pray that God’s name may be recognized and honored now, even as we

look forward to the day when “every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:10-11).

In other words, “hallowed be your name” provides the foundation for our prayers, for our individual lives, and for our lives together as the church, Christ’s body on earth.

So when we pray these words, we are asking God to help us live today as his servants who reflect his glory and lordship everywhere, now and forever.

In what ways can you honor God’s name today?

Father, may you be glorified in and through our lives and the church everywhere on earth. Amen.

YOUR KINGDOM COME

"The kingdom of God has come near."

—Mark 1:15

Jesus was the greatest preacher who ever lived. Do you know the main topic of his sermons? Jesus' most important theme was to announce the good news of the kingdom of God. This captured the core of his teaching. He boldly announced that God had broken into human history and that through Jesus himself God's rightful reign over creation, human history, and every human being had arrived. All of Jesus' sermons, talks, and healings revolved around this good news of God's kingdom coming.

When we pray the second petition of the Lord's Prayer, "Your kingdom come" (Matthew 6:10), we long for God's rule to be more fully realized in our world. We ask God to show everyone who he is through his Word and through his Holy Spirit. We ask that the church, his children throughout the

world, may prosper and grow. We ask God to push away and protect against any power that works against his good will.

Jesus announced that the kingdom has come, but we're still waiting for the kingdom to come fully. How do we know that will happen? We know because Jesus has risen from the dead, has ascended to rule in heaven, and will come again to bring his kingdom fully on the earth (Revelation 21-22).

In all our work and prayer today, the longing for God's kingdom should be in our hearts and on our lips as we pray, "Your kingdom come."

May your kingdom come, Father, in our lives and in our world. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

YOUR WILL BE DONE

"My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."
—Matthew 26:39

"Whatever." Maybe you've heard someone say this when they had to deal with something they didn't like.

When we pray to God, saying, "Your will be done . . ." (Matthew 6:10)—is that like saying "Whatever" and throwing up our hands in resignation?

By no means! This petition of the Lord's Prayer, "Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven," asks God to make our world as he originally intended it to be. It asks that our small, selfish desires be replaced by God's expansive, good desires for all people everywhere. It asks that our world's corrupt and grinding systems align with God's just and blameless ways so that everything in creation can flourish.

When we pray "Your will be done . . .," we commit our-

selves to participating in God's good will for our lives and our world.

The best example of praying "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" is in Jesus' prayer on the night before his death. Facing a situation far worse than any of us could imagine, Jesus aligned himself completely with God's will as he said, "Not as I will, but as you will."

Jesus' submission to God's will has brought us eternal blessings. When we submit to God's will, we also bring blessings to his world.

Help us, Father, to do your will in our lives and in your world. Amen.

GIVE US TODAY OUR DAILY BREAD

Taking the five loaves and two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to his disciples to distribute to the people.
—Mark 6:41

Jesus teaches us to pray, “Give us today our daily bread” (Matthew 6:11). But is this request only about bread? While it is asking God for the food we need each day, it also covers having all our needs supplied by our loving Father in heaven. So this applies to all our basic needs for good health and well-being, recognizing that we depend on God each day for all good things.

We should note something important, though. While some people claim that behind the petition for daily needs lies a request for “spiritual bread,” that’s not the main point here.

We need food every day in order to live. Without nourishment, we die. As the feeding of the five thousand clearly shows, Jesus knows we need physical sustenance. When the crowds following him were

faint with hunger, he satisfied them with an abundance of bread and fish.

Asking God for our daily needs shows that we also trust him to provide for us. With the daily sustenance that God graciously offers, we can delight in his bountiful goodness and be refreshed in our bodies to serve him and others with joy and gladness.

So the next time you’re about to take a bite of food, remember who provided it, give thanks to him, and use the energy gained from it for loving God and serving others.

Father, give us today what we need in order to love and serve you and the people around us. Amen.

FORGIVE US . . .

Have mercy on me, O God. . . Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.
—Psalm 51:1-2

This petition of the Lord's Prayer has two versions. Matthew quotes Jesus as saying, "Forgive us our debts" (Matthew 6:12), and Luke quotes him as saying, "Forgive us our sins" (Luke 11:4). Either way, "debts" and "sins"—and also "trespasses"—describe how seriously we fall short before God and how much we need his grace.

The good news, thankfully, is that Jesus paid our debt of sin for us, and when we confess our sins in Jesus' name, God forgives us.

So we might wonder, "If we have been forgiven, why does Jesus teach us to keep asking God for forgiveness?"

Well, the problem is that we still struggle with sin. Ultimately we are forgiven. But, like wayward children, we continue to make offenses each day—against God and against people.

So we must turn daily to our heavenly Father, seeking his compassion and nurturing care so that we can keep growing to become like his Son, Jesus Christ.

When we daily ask God to forgive us our sins, we are seeking to grow in honoring and serving him in the world.

Father in heaven, we are so grateful that, by your grace and mercy, Jesus has paid the debt of all our sins. Help us in our daily struggles to live more and more for you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

AS WE FORGIVE . . .

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

—Matthew 18:35

Do you know the phrase *quid pro quo*? It's Latin, and it means "this for that"—or, in other words, "Do this for me, and I'll do that for you."

At first glance, that may seem to be the meaning of the fifth petition of the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our debts, *as we also have forgiven our debtors*" (Matthew 6:12), or "Forgive us our sins, *for we also forgive everyone who sins against us*" (Luke 11:4).

And we might say, "Wait—aren't God's grace and forgiveness unconditional? If we must forgive to receive forgiveness, isn't that a *quid pro quo*?" No. The Bible teaches that we are all guilty before God, and we can't earn our forgiveness. Jesus stood in our place and bore the punishment for our sins on the cross. Through Jesus, we are made right with

God, an act of pure grace. This indeed is good news!

We can't earn our forgiveness, but the way we live shows how much we are open to being changed by the Lord's grace. As we have been forgiven, Jesus calls us to show forgiveness toward people who sin against us. If we refuse to forgive others, we are stubbornly refusing to see that we ourselves need forgiveness.

When we pray, "Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive . . ." it's not "this for that" but more like "this out of that." Because we are forgiven, we can show forgiveness to others.

Father, from the depths of your mercy, you have forgiven our many sins. Help us to forgive anyone who sins against us. Amen.

LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION

Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father. . . .
—James 1:17

The petition “Lead us not into temptation” (Matthew 6:13) has often confused people. It can be misread to imply that God leads us into temptation. But would God actually do that? No.

As we reflect on this petition, let’s be perfectly clear: God *does not* tempt us. Period.

But, as the book of James helps us understand, God does allow testing and trials. God tested Abraham, Moses, Job, and others. Jesus himself faced temptations in the wilderness, testing at the hands of religious leaders, and an unimaginable trial as he gave up his own life to pay the debt of our sins.

God allows testing and trials as opportunities for refining our faith. It’s not so that he can say “Gotcha!” or pounce on our failings or make accusations. Out of fatherly love, God can

use trials and testing to nudge us along in our growth in faith as followers of Jesus.

When we pray, “Lead us not into temptation,” we’re humbly admitting our own weakness and tendency to stumble. We’re reaching out in sheer dependence on God. We’re asking him to guide and help us through every trial and temptation of life. We’re trusting and believing with all of our hearts that he will never leave us or forsake us but always love and protect us.

We confess, Father, that we have no strength on our own to resist temptations. Please guide and protect us. We trust that you will never lead us where your grace cannot keep us safe in your care. Amen.

DELIVER US FROM EVIL

Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against . . . the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.
—Ephesians 6:12

With the request “Deliver us from evil” (Matthew 6:13, KJV), we implore God to keep us safe from the powers of evil. Some of our English translations describe this also as protection from “the evil one”—that is, Satan, or the devil.

Certainly “evil” and “the evil one” both threaten to undo us. As the book of Ephesians points out, the dark forces on earth and the evil powers in the spiritual realms are lined up against us.

In another passage, the Bible also warns that our “enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8). We live in a world filled with terrifying enemies.

We should be just as horrified, though, by the evil that lurks in our own hearts, twisting us

with greed, lust, envy, pride, deceit, and more.

In the face of our adversaries and of the sinfulness deep in our hearts, we can’t help crying out to God, “Deliver us from evil!”

And we can trust in God to help. By his Holy Spirit, we can be strong “in his mighty power” and be equipped with the spiritual battle gear we need to stand firm and to serve God with confidence.

Father, on our own we are weak and helpless. Deliver us from evil, we pray, and provide us with the faith and assurance we need to serve you boldly. Amen.

THE KINGDOM, THE POWER, AND THE GLORY

"Yours, Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours."
—1 Chronicles 29:11

From the earliest days of the church, Christians have ended the Lord's Prayer with the words "For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever." But those words are not in the earliest manuscripts of Matthew or Luke, so we don't find them with the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples.

However, we do find something very similar in a prayer of King David from the Old Testament. Our passage today from 1 Chronicles 29 includes the lines "Yours, Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory. . . . Yours, Lord, is the kingdom. . . ." And we can easily see that these words make a fitting closing to the prayer Jesus taught.

What's more, it was a standard practice to end prayers with a doxology—a declaration of

highest praise. So, like other Christians throughout the centuries, we can declare this doxology with confidence and joy when we come to the end of the Lord's Prayer.

These words remind us of the majesty, power, and glory of God, our Savior. They resonate in our hearts and assure us that God loves us, provides for us, and sustains the world he has made. They also point forward to the day when God's kingdom will be fully known and all of creation will rejoice and praise his holy name forever.

We worship you, Father, "for yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever." Help us to live in such a way that our words and actions proclaim who you are. Amen.

AMEN

No matter how many promises God has made, they are “Yes” in Christ. And so through him the “Amen” is spoken by us to the glory of God.
—2 Corinthians 1:20

My brother often ends his text messages with “10-4.” Years ago, airline pilots in movies would signal the end of their two-way radio messages by saying “Over and out.”

When we end our prayers with “Amen,” are we merely signing off? No, the ancient Hebrew word *amen* has been translated into so many different languages that it has become a universally used word. This little Hebrew word packs a punch—it means “firm,” “true,” or “sure.” It’s like saying, “It is true!” “Right on!” “Make it so!” or “May it be so!”

Christians use “Amen” to affirm something. At the end of our prayers we assert that God *absolutely* hears and answers our prayers.

Jesus’ use of “Amen” signals another significant use of this word. In his teaching, Jesus

often begins with the words “Amen, amen I say to you . . .” or, “Truly, truly I say to you . . .” In this way Jesus affirms that what he is saying is the truth.

So when we say “Amen” at the end of the Lord’s Prayer—or any other prayer—we confess that God will certainly hear and answer our prayers.

Rather than being a *signoff*, “Amen” is a *sendoff* of trust and assurance that God hears and answers us.

Father in heaven, you are reliable, firm, sure, and true in all you say and do. Help us to live in the confidence of your love and mercy in all we do. Amen.

PRAY FOR THOSE IN AUTHORITY

I urge . . . that petitions, prayers, intercessions and thanksgiving be made for all people—for kings and those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.

—1 Timothy 2:1-2

Along with the Lord's Prayer, which we have been looking at in depth this month, many other Bible texts give us helpful insights for prayer in our everyday lives.

In his first letter to Timothy, for example, the apostle Paul urges prayer for "all people," accenting the need to pray for "those in authority" over us. Behind this direction lies Paul's conviction that God has placed our leaders in authority over us (Romans 13:1). Remarkably, Paul wrote these words during the reign of the Roman emperor Nero, one of the most anti-Christian rulers of all time.

But the advice to pray for rulers, both good and bad, wasn't new. More than 600 years earlier, the prophet Jeremiah urged the exiles of Jerusalem and Judah to pray for the "peace and

prosperity" of Babylon, where they were taken as captives (Jeremiah 29:7).

When we pray for people in authority, we recognize God's sovereign hand in our lives and our societies. We implore God to aid our rulers in governing with justice and equity so that everyone may live in the peace our Creator intended. By these prayers, we ask God to use us as his agents. Prayers for our rulers and leaders spring from our commitment to sharing Jesus' love and mercy with our neighbors.

Father, we trust you as the righteous ruler over all. Bless and guide those in authority over us. Use us as witnesses to your goodness and mercy. Amen.

PRAY WITH THANKSGIVING

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.
—Philippians 4:6

When I visited for meals at my grandmother's house as a boy, she always let me do the dishes. Her kitchen-sink window had a shelf with beautiful purple, white, and pink African violets. She also kept notecards on her windowsill with handwritten Bible verses. One card, I remember, highlighted Paul's sound advice for praying "in every situation."

Though he was probably a prisoner at the time, Paul writes a cheerful, optimistic letter to the church in Philippi, brimming with joy. He includes sound pastoral advice for daily Christian living, including suggestions for prayer. As in other letters, Paul urges his friends to pray in all situations. And "do not be anxious about anything," he says, but bring everything before God.

Paul also mentions a vitally important ingredient: praying with a thankful heart. Indeed, "thanksgiving" is one of the basic characteristics of the Christian life. With a thankful heart we can acknowledge that we are utterly dependent on our loving and faithful heavenly Father.

Paul assures us that when we bring everything to God in prayer with thanksgiving, we will experience the peace of God that beats all conventional wisdom and keeps us secure in Jesus' love. My grandmother knew this and loved to be reminded of it.

Father, fill our hearts with thanksgiving for your many, many blessings, and help us to turn to you in all situations. Amen.

ASK AWAY!

[Jesus said,] "You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it."
—John 14:14

Maybe you have heard stories about genies. Genies are imaginary beings that can live in a lamp or a bottle, and when the bottle is rubbed, the genie comes out to grant wishes.

At first, Jesus' words "You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it" may sound like the words of a genie.

But Jesus isn't talking about granting any wish we might have. As the apostle John explains in our Bible reading for today, what we pray for should be in line with God's will.

And how do we know what God's will is? We learn about God's will through reading and studying his Word. Prayer, in fact, goes hand in hand with knowing God's Word and will. As God reveals himself to us in his Word, we naturally grow in love for God and in our desire to serve him and others.

For example, we know that God calls us to love our neighbors, to care about their well-being, and to live peaceably with justice for all people. So we must pray (and work) for just and fair policies so that people everywhere may have good food and housing and safety, that they may learn and grow and flourish as God intends.

There's nothing magical about prayer. Prayers based on the foundation of God's Word put us in the position of wanting what God wants and seeking his kingdom. And we can be assured that God answers these prayers as we ask them in Jesus' name.

Father, lead us by your Word and Spirit. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

BE PERSISTENT!

Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.
—Luke 18:1

The widow in this parable has been called many things: troublesome, annoying, irritating, irksome, pesky. Yet Jesus applauds her for being persistent. Her relentless pursuit of justice eventually convinces the judge to help her, even though he doesn't really care about her.

Of course, Jesus isn't suggesting that God is like the judge in this story, or that we will have to be irritating to get God's attention. In fact, as Jesus points out, God is the opposite of the uncaring, unfair judge.

Persistence in prayer, though, raises an important question about prayer itself. God reigns over the cosmos and pays attention to every detail, including even the hairs on our head (Matthew 10:30). So why would we need to pray at all? God knows all our needs, and his purposes and plans are set. Can we really, then, change

God's mind for a different outcome?

There is no easy answer to this question, but we can affirm several things the Bible teaches. Yes, God reigns, and we can take great comfort in that. What's more, God can use our prayers as a *means* to his ends. As James 5:16 says, "The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective."

Our prayers bring us into fellowship with God and align us with his will, and they play a role in bringing God's righteous and just kingdom on earth. So let's be persistent in prayer, trusting and believing that God hears and answers.

Father, help us to pray and to keep praying for your kingdom to come, trusting you in all things. Amen.

PRAY FOR YOUR ENEMIES

"I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."
—Matthew 5:44

In this passage Jesus flips a common saying from that day on its head.

People would commonly splice the Old Testament command to "love your neighbor" (Leviticus 19:18) with a vengeful phrase: "... and hate your enemy." The people typically considered anyone from another nation as an enemy.

And they were probably stunned to hear Jesus say, "I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

What's radical about Jesus' demand is that it's not just aiming for "peaceful coexistence," "live and let live," or "let bygones be bygones." He's commanding proactive, practical love. We are commanded to love our enemies and to seek the best for them—not just so that they will leave us alone.

An important part of loving our enemies, Jesus says, includes praying for them. Frankly, it's impossible to keep hating someone if we're praying for their good. Praying for our enemies helps us to see them as God sees them. It helps us to begin to care about their needs and treat them like a neighbor.

Unfortunately, we all have antagonists of one sort or another. Jesus himself calls us to love those people and to pray for them and for their well-being. After all, that's what he did for us. "While we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son" (Romans 5:10).

Father, we were your enemies, but now, in Jesus, we are your children. Help us to pray for and to love our enemies. Amen.

PRAY FOR UNITY

"I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one."
—John 17:22

Our Bible reading today is from a beautiful prayer that Jesus offered just before he was arrested and crucified. This is the longest prayer of Jesus that is recorded in the Bible. It also provides some of his most profound teaching about prayer.

Here we can focus on two important truths.

First, Jesus prays for his followers. He prays for their protection and their unity. He asks that his followers share the unity or oneness that Jesus shares with his Father—"that they may be one as we are one." Through Jesus' unity with the Father, we belong to Jesus *and* we belong to each other. Like Jesus, we should pray continually for unity with our sisters and brothers.

Second, our unity in Christ is not an end in itself. We are Christ's body for sharing his

love with each other and with the world. The Holy Spirit uses our unity to draw others to Jesus, and Jesus unites them with the Father as well. Our oneness in Christ is our most powerful witness.

Sadly, though, the unbelieving world too often sees us bitterly squabbling with each other. As Jesus prayed for our unity, let's keep praying for the church's unity so that Christ may be glorified in the world through us.

Father, thank you for the unity we have through Jesus, your Son. Please, by your Spirit's power, unify us to be a powerful witness of your love. Amen.

“COME, LORD JESUS!”

*He who testifies to these things says, “Yes, I am coming soon.”
Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.*

—Revelation 22:20

Prayer is so essential to the Christian life that the Bible closes with a short prayer: “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.”

The words “Come, Lord” probably draw from an Aramaic expression used by early Christians: “*Maranatha!*” For example, the apostle Paul used this Aramaic phrase as he closed his first letter to the church in Corinth (see 1 Corinthians 16:22).

Why would Paul use an Aramaic phrase while writing to a Greek-speaking church? Well, Aramaic was the common, local language spoken in the region where Jesus and his disciples lived. Some have suggested that *maran* was a word the people used to voice their longing for the Messiah to come. And by adding *atha*, they say, Paul echoed a confession of the early Christians in his day. Pointing to Christ,

those words mean, “Our Lord has come.”

In Paul’s day, Christians apparently also used *maranatha* as a mutual greeting, identifying themselves in a world that was hostile to them. They also used similar words as a short prayer repeated throughout the day, *Marana tha*, “Come, O Lord.”

Significantly, at the close of the Bible, this prayer for Jesus’ second coming is preceded by a promise from Jesus himself: “Yes, I am coming soon.” Can there be any greater assurance?

As we work and long for the coming of God’s kingdom, may our prayers often include these words from the closing lines of Scripture: “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!”

Maranatha. Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.



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