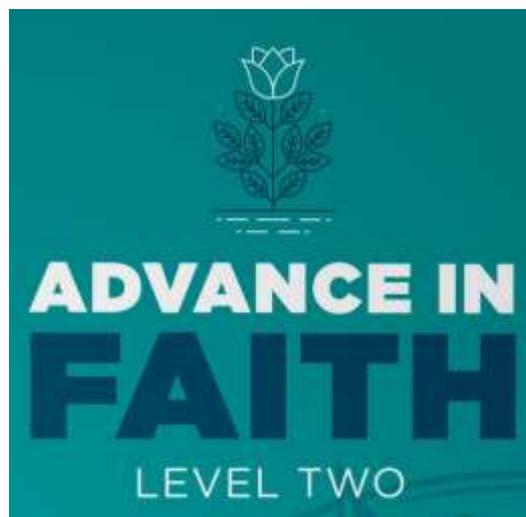


The Lord's Prayer

Week 4 — Our daily bread



Two sides of relationship

Here are two caricatures of prayer:

- a) **It's all about me.** For some, prayer is presenting God with my shopping list. God is a cosmic slot machine: I put in the request, and get what I want. You will struggle with prayer if you take this approach: it doesn't work, for God is not the servant of the selfish.
- b) **It's all about God.** Others are so aware of their nothingness compared to God, that they dare not ask for anything for themselves. They may ask for others, but can't ask for self. Again, this undermines a prayer-life, for there is no relating.

Prayer is not primarily about asking; it is about **relating**.

The prayer-relationship consists of two sides:

- He is our Father; we are his children.
- He is holy; we reflect his name.
- He is King; we are citizens of his governance.

Our identity comes from who he is. Our contribution to the relationship matters to him: we give him pleasure in responding to his love.

Meaningful prayer is the enjoyment of this relationship.

That's why the first half of Jesus' prayer consists of enjoying God.

Then we talk about our side of the relationship too: that's part of our sovereign's will for us.

What we learn in prayer about how to relate to God helps inform our human relationships too. You enjoy the company of friends who ask after you first, and you struggle with people who only want to talk about themselves. A good friendship does require you to open up and reveal yourself, but it starts with listening, focusing on the other. So what we practice in prayer (loving God) forms us for relationship with each other too (loving people).

Perhaps God gave us two ears but just one mouth so we would remember to listen first.

Our daily bread

In our culture, this is quite an odd thing to pray. If we thought about what we were praying, I can imagine someone going, "Give us this day our daily bread. Oh, but not today, God: I'm on a low-carb. diet."

We do not think of God as the source of our food. Ask an Australian where their food comes from: they will reply, "Coles" or "Woolies," or perhaps "a farm." We have pantries and fridges, supermarkets and delis, open day and night.

But think about it: where did the food come from? Who designed the earth with its nutrients and seasons and water cycles? Who created the seeds and fruit, the garden for our enjoyment? We team up with him, to tend his garden, but God is the creator who makes stuff grow.

And yet, some people are starving tonight. Why? There is enough food to feed everyone, yet some die of starvation.

Famine is not primarily about drought. It's caused by the way we manage the resources God gives. Dictators and terrorists intentionally starve their enemies. Many of us who live in affluent Western nations (like Australia) accumulate more and more resources, while others starve. It is not as if God has failed to provide enough for the world: the problem is in how we manage what God provides.

The pronouns Jesus used in his prayer are important.

The first half was all about God:

your name, your kingdom, your will.

When Jesus moves the focus to the human side of the relationship, it's a communal prayer — not *me* individually, but *us* together under God's care and governance:

our bread, our debts, deliver us.

It won't do to change the prayer to "Give *me* today *my* daily bread."¹

Who does Jesus mean by "our"?

So, who is the *us*? If we just think in terms of ourselves (our own family, friends, church, or even believers), we may draw circles smaller than Jesus did. When he thought of God's providence, he thought of all humanity. If "us" means the kingdom of God, **Jesus vision is for all humans under Father's care in restored creation.**

Just a few verses earlier, Jesus stressed that Father's provision is for everyone—even enemies and oppressors who cause grief. The godless can only understand that they have a loving heavenly Father if we behave like his children, reflecting Father's care in practical ways:

Mt 5⁴⁴ Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,⁴⁵ so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

So, how do we live this?

¹ For example, Elmer L. Towns says, "Instinctively, I begin to pray, Give me my daily bread ... Forgive me my sins ... Lead me not into temptation ... Deliver me from the evil one ..." — *How to Pray: When You Don't Know What to Say* (Ventura, CA: Regal; Gospel Light, 2006), 63.

In the Western world today, one of our biggest health issues is obesity. We overeat. We know it's unhealthy, so spend more to fix the problem. We buy diet foods that give us less energy (calories) for the same price. We buy pills, substitute drinks, diet programmes, and motivational materials. We go to Weight Watchers. Every issue of every woman's magazine has article to help us address this problem!

In other words, we spend literally billions of dollars every year to mask the real problem: over-consumption.

At the same time, people elsewhere in the world go to bed hungry. Some literally starve to death. Does it strike you that this is not how God intended us to live when he provided resources for us? Does it strike you that there might be a simple way to solve both these problems, at once?

Dirie Waris was born in Somalia. She knew subsistence life—eking out an existence every day. As a teenager, she ran away. She ended up in Britain, where she became a model, and then moved to New York. In her book, she describes what it felt like experiencing both sides:

On one side of the world we're struggling to feed people
On the other side of the world, people are paying money
to lose weight. I watch commercials on TV for weight-loss
programs and I scream, 'You want to lose weight—go to
Africa! How about that? How about if you lose weight
while you're helping people? Do you ever think about
that? You'll feel good and different, too. You'll accom-
plish two powerful things at one time. I promise you, when
you come back you will have learned so much. Your mind
will be much clearer than when you left home.'²

Jesus instructs us to pray for God's kingdom—his wise governance of the world, his will done on earth as in heaven. What is God's will in regard to the food he provides? What are we committing to when we pray, "Give us this day our daily bread?"

Prayer takes us into partnership with God, our sovereign.

Prayer reveals our partnership with him in his kingdom.

² Waris Dirie, *Desert Flower: The Extraordinary Life of a Desert Nomad*. New York: Virago 1998. 363.

Why “daily” bread?

Jesus lived in an agrarian society, defined by seasons of ploughing and sowing and waiting for rain and harvesting grain. They prayed for God’s **annual** provision, e.g. this is from *The Eighteen Benedictions*:

Bless for us, O Lord, **this year** for our welfare, with every kind of produce, and bring near speedily the **year** of the end of our redemption; give dew and rain upon the face of the earth and satisfy the world from the treasuries of your goodness, and give a blessing upon the work of your hands. Blessed are you, O Lord, who bless the **years!**³

Why did Jesus teach his followers to ask God for *daily* bread? Was there any time in Israel’s story where God provided bread daily?

The people listening to Jesus’ prayer would have recalled the manna in the wilderness.⁴ *Man hu* in Hebrew means “That what?” They had no idea what it was, so they called referred to it as “That what?” Moses explained, “It is the bread the LORD has given you to eat” (Exodus 16:15).

The *man-hu* was literally God’s provision, with odd characteristics:

- It was always enough, whether they gathered a little or a lot (16:18).
- It wouldn’t keep for tomorrow, except on Fridays (16:20).

This was *daily bread*—God’s miraculous provision for Israel, as he led them out of Egypt, through the wilderness, to the place where they would live as his kingdom.

And in the New Testament, Jesus is the new Moses. He is leading humanity out of slavery under the oppression of human rule, into the kingdom of God—the reign of God through his anointed. This is a new exodus, a new covenant, the restoration of the kingdom of God over the whole earth.

There was a moment when Jesus provided bread for the multitude in the wilderness (John 6:1-13). Moses had promised God would raise up another prophet like him (Deuteronomy 18:15), and the 5000 who ate in the wilderness recognized Jesus as the new Moses (6:14). Jesus

³ Quoted from: David Arthur deSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods and Ministry Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 80.

⁴ For example, Bock says, “Most see in the image an allusion to the picture of God’s constant provision of manna, not because of the miraculous provision but because of its regularity (Exod. 16:18; Prov. 30:8; Ellis 1974: 165).” Darrell L Bock, *Luke Volume 2: 9:51-24:53*, Baker exegetical commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1996, 1054.

explained that he was indeed “the bread from heaven” calling them to trust him, to participate in him (6:26-58).

But this does not mean spiritualising the prayer, as if it had nothing to do with real bread. When the Messiah came and established God's kingdom, everyone would be provided for, and injustice would be turned upside-down. That's the hope Mary felt about what her son:

Luke 1 ⁵² He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; ⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.

Jesus' kingdom message was good news for hungry people:

Luke 6 ²⁰ Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. ²¹ Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied.

Jesus calls us, in our prayers, to engage with him in that kingdom message. He told stories against those who feasted and ignored the poor (Lk 16:19-20), against those who built barns to assure their future (Lk 12:18). We are not to spend our lives storing up stuff like the godless do; rather to trust God daily for our food (Mt 6:19-33).

The word translated “daily” is *epiούσιος*, and it's been difficult to know what it meant, since it never turned up on other ancient writings. Some even suggested perhaps it was a spiritual word. Then we found it: on a scrap of paper at an ancient rubbish dump in Oxyrhynchus (in Egypt):

Albert Debrunner, a professor at the University of Bern, was going over some of the Oxyrhynchus scraps of wastepaper at his library worktable and discovered the very word, *epiousion*, in an ancient housekeeping book, a shopping list that also included chickpeas and straw. ... emphasising that the bread was to be fresh, *today's* bread.⁵

There's something yummy about fresh bread. Yesterday's bread just doesn't have that taste, that aroma, that freshness. So why would we waste our lives storing away large quantities of bread so we have stale bread for the rest of our lives? Jesus wants us to think differently about our daily provisions. It makes no sense to accumulate wealth in bank accounts or superannuation or shares that are quickly devastated by financial collapse. Even real estate can drop in value. “Financial security” is an oxymoron—a broken, substitute god. This is exactly the context of Jesus' prayer (see Matthew 6:19-33).

⁵ Peterson, Eugene. *Eat this Book: The Art of Spiritual Reading*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2006. 149-150.

Conclusion

When we accumulate wealth while others in the human family starve, we dishonour the Father who provides for us.

What would it mean for your lifestyle—your relationship to others and to God—for you to truly pray, “Give us this day our daily bread?”

Remember, prayer is partnership with God, our heavenly sovereign.

Group time

Discussion starters

1. Discuss the idea of financial security. Do you have a need to be in control, to know where tomorrow's bread will come from? Do you like living on the edge where you're relying on God one day at a time? What's the right approach, given our needs, the needs of others, and God's provision?
2. How do you feel about presenting our own needs to God? Is it natural for you to do so, or is it a struggle?
3. How do you feel about presenting the needs of others to God? Is it natural for you to do so, or is it a struggle?

Prayer starters

Are there things you would like your friends to pray for? It may be for you (health, job) or for others in your family or community.

Ask around the group. Then take some time to bring the needs of our brothers and sisters to the attention of our Father.

For Further Thought

What would it look like for you to gain a kingdom perspective of God's provision?

As you ponder that question, consider how the early church responded:

Acts 4 ³⁴ There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold ³⁵ and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

Acts 11 ²⁸ And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius).
²⁹ So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea.

1 John 3 ¹⁶ By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. ¹⁷ But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?
¹⁸ Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.

A popular writer from the second century church taught:

Do not partake of God's creation in abundance by yourselves, but also share with those in need. ⁶

In the fourth century, St Basil of Caesarea taught:

The bread that is spoiling in your house belongs to the hungry. The shoes that are mildewing under your bed belong to those who have none. The clothes stored away in your trunk belong to those who are naked. The money that depreciates in your treasury belongs to the poor. ⁷

We are so wealthy in Australia. What could we do with our resources that would honour our Father and provider, and demonstrate his kingdom rule in his world?

And finally:

Jesus did not teach us to pray: 'Give *me* my daily bread.' He taught us to pray: 'Give *us* our daily bread.' The problem of the world is not that there is not enough to go round; there is enough and to spare. The problem is not the *supply* of life's essentials; it is the *distribution* of them. This prayer teaches us never to be selfish in our prayers. It is a prayer which we can help God to answer by giving to others who are less fortunate than we are. This prayer is not only a prayer that we may *receive* our daily bread; it is also a prayer that we may *share* our daily bread with others. ⁸

⁶ "Shepherd of Hermes" Vision III, ix.17, in *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, edited by Michael William Holmes. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1999. 362-363.

⁷ St Basil the Great, quoted by William Willimon & Stanley Hauerwas, *Lord, Teach Us*, Nashville: Abingdon, 1996, 76. Quoted by David Timms, *Living the Lord's Prayer*. Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2008.

⁸ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 3rd edition, (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2001), 252.