

## THE BREAD FOR EXISTENCE

There are six “petitions” in the Lord’s Prayer (as we have it from Luke). We have looked at the first three. The first one is but a single word. It tells us what our true and rightful relationship with God is. The second phrase takes us into the presence of the numinous, unfathomable God, whose name we only dimly and partly know and, if we do know, hardly dare to utter. It is an old truth that, for many in our day, seems brand new. The prayer calls us to discern, according to our best capacity to do so, the grandeur and holiness of God. The third phrase takes us to the very core and purpose of the prayer itself: to pray this prayer establishes that it is God’s rule and reign that is our highest allegiance and dearest purpose – the thing for which we gladly live and, when called upon, the thing for which we will cheerfully die.

“*Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven*” is probably a later addition, a further comment on the original “*Thy will be done.*” It wanted to make sure people did not think of God’s Kingdom as something far away or for some later time. The Kingdom is here, now, in our very midst. Live *for* it and *in* it now! Some scholars have pointed out that Jesus may have at first given this prayer in the short form, as Luke has it, and that Jesus Himself may have later added the phrases we find in Matthew, as He realized that many people were missing some of its intended meaning.

In any case, with the phrase “*Thy kingdom come,*” the prayer reaches its apex and central focus. In the remaining three petitions, we come away from the prayer’s heights to deal with some personal, mundane problems and concerns that we all have. The essence of the Lord’s Prayer – and the WAY of Life which it stands for and teaches us – is clear in the first three lines. But faced with such heights and called to such glory, we humans get very uncomfortable. There are fears and problems and realities, and we have some very real wonderments about whether or not we can live for such things the way we are, or for very long, with any consistency.

So the prayer descends to our fears and concerns. How do we survive if we try to live this way? What happens when – not if, but when – we make mistakes? And what about, you know, the unmentionable thing? Yeah – what about that? (Can we even whisper it? What about the dark side within us? What about Satan? What about the evil within?)

What about the shadow we all carry?) How can we pray such prayers before God when we have ... THAT?

So the prayer now goes on to deal with matters crucial to us on a pragmatic, daily basis: Trust. Forgiveness. Humility. It sounds so simple to say, and we find it wonderful to really pray this way. But many people do not realize the magnitude. It is true, for instance, that these last three petitions are appeals toward a lifetime's spiritual growth and labor. Every Christian, if you can forgive the analogy, needs a Ph.D. in TRUST, another Ph.D. in FORGIVENESS, and a third Ph.D. in HUMILITY. There are no honorary degrees in this business. They all have to be earned – learned – in the daily rounds and trials of real life. If we flunk any of these three subjects, we cannot go on into the Christian Life. Today we look at TRUST. The basic, foundational, grassroots kind of trust.

How many times in your life so far have you prayed to the Lord God (infinite in wisdom, goodness, and love) – to the ONE who is able to do all things, and who also, we have learned from the Cross finally and beyond question, happens to love you – how many times have you made your appeal, your personal request to God, saying, “*Give us this day our daily bread*”? What exactly do you mean by that? Does God answer this prayer? *Has* God answered this prayer? Will God always answer this prayer? Do you live by this petition? What exactly do you mean as you constantly beg God for “daily bread”?

There are some traditions which warn against praying thoughtlessly, making careless requests, or invoking spiritual or divine powers without sincerity or devotion. But perhaps we should not get into that. Or maybe we should, just a bit. One of the punishments – for praying “*Give us this day our daily bread*” without meaning it – is to have a heart attack. (At the last official tally, I saw it was still the nation's number-one killer.) That's not the only punishment for mis-praying this petition, but it is one of them. Anyway, when I die of a heart attack tomorrow, I want you to know it was not because I prayed wrong, but because God has a sense of humor.

I'm just saying that there are dramatic and immediate connections between this prayer and the lives we live. Stress is a killer; it takes the heart out of us. If I pray this part of the Lord's Prayer right, I do not live under stress. Daily bread is the end of stress (at its very foundation). Though I do not always pray this prayer right, I am not going to die of a stress-related heart attack tomorrow, because

writing this sermon has reminded me again how to pray this prayer right, and I can feel the difference. But for how long will I remember?

In praying this part of the prayer – *Give us this day our daily bread* – we turn our survival, in all of its manifestations, over and into the hands of Almighty God. When we do that – when we mean it – we no longer live under stress. We trust God for our necessities. Three times a day, every day. If you believe in this Lord and receive and pray His prayer, it will change your life – no question. But even that, much as it is, is not all.

When we take a prayer like this, intended to be prayed every day (even three times a day) for years, then it is possible and important to discover and claim every implication we can find and every innuendo that seems intended. This prayer can stand that kind of scrutiny, and it blesses us with each new discovery we make.

Who are we saying this prayer to? *Abba*, of the hallowed name. That is, we are not asking for survival from the world around us anymore. We deal with the world, but that is not where we put our trust anymore. So we stop praying to the boss, the business, the country, the insurance company, the spouse, or whatever we used to count on for our security. We do not throw them away, or curse them, or get less appreciative when they are good to us. But that is not where our trust lies anymore. We pray to God: *Give us this day our daily bread*. And if we do that, the stress goes. It is in God's hands, and so it's all right with us. Even as we work to change the world, it's all right with us. Some people call it inner peace. But there is a direct connection between inner peace and being content with daily bread.

Notice then, also, that this is a request. It is not a demand. It is only a request. So many people miss this part or get it wrong. (How do I know? Because I get it wrong so often.) It is a petition. If we know, at least in part, who *Abba* is and how much *Abba* cares for us, then destiny and our future belong to God. We are no longer in control or command. We are servants – citizens – of the Kingdom, obedient under the King's rule and WAY. So we make request. *Give us this day our daily bread*. It is still up to God. The day will come when this prayer will fail on some level. It is not a matter of *if* the day comes; it is a matter of *when* the day comes in which we will no longer be sustained here. We know that day is coming. We simply do not know when. But we have accepted this, died with Christ, put our trust in God's hands. It's okay with us when our days run out, as long as it's okay with God. Still no stress. On this level, the trust is absolute.

Eventually, we all notice that the prayer says “us.” *Give us this day our daily bread.* It is not greedy or self-centered. We expect to share bread – with family, with friends, with church. How big is the church? How big is Christ’s church? This one word – us – is about community and true friendship, about sharing and love. It keeps telling us new sermons and parables and possibilities as we find ourselves praying it: praying *give us* – not me, *us* – *give us ... give us ... give us ...* day after day. If you believe this Lord, if you receive and pray His prayer, it will transform your life – no question!

The bread is daily bread. By the way, “daily” is a very rare Greek word. It only appears two places in the Bible, the other being in Matthew’s version of the Lord’s Prayer. And its use is not found in secular writings either, so there is little way to find comparisons for confident translation. It may mean “bread for today” or “bread for the morrow” or “the bread of sustenance” or “the bread of existence.” It depends on which Greek root the word is coming from. My favorite, among the legitimate possibilities, is *eimi*, which means “to go.” *Give us the bread to go on with.* That may not be right, but it *feels* right. *Give us this day the bread to go on with.* The scholars struggle, but the range of meaning is not wide. Any of these meanings still leave us with approximately the same message, just slightly different ways of coming at it.

The bread is daily bread. It is not a five-year plan. It is not a ten-year plan. I keep wanting to pray, “Lord, make me so rich that I will never need to worry or be anxious ever again. Then I will stop being stressed and start serving You.” And of course, God says, “I have an even better idea. Why don’t you learn to trust me now, just the way things are. Then you will have found the real truth – the real secret – and nothing will take it away from you ever again. As for your serving ME, that is the highest privilege in Life. You do not have to rush it to please ME. I have few needs and plenty of time. *You* are the one missing out. The reason for my invitation – well, I was thinking of you!”

Somewhere deep within, we know such truth. Nevertheless, TRUST is a hard course to pass, isn’t it? What do we really mean – what are we asking for – when we pray this prayer? Whatever we think we are asking for, we are asking for an end to stress and anxiety about earthly survival, and we are asking to be taught how to trust God day by day, one day at a time – NOW.

You do realize, I presume, that Mother Teresa and many others over the generations have prayed this prayer to mean: divest yourself of earthly goods and depend totally on God's care (through the compassion of others) to keep you alive, to keep you eating – literally from day to day. And many of them believe that if you have two days' worth of bread, somebody else is starving because you have their share. If you have money in the bank, somebody else is starving because you have their share. And many suspect that Jesus was revealing a social-gospel axiom in this prayer: that if we would all learn to trust and be content with enough bread for just one day at a time, then – and only then – there would be enough bread for everyone. If these people are right, then only those who take what we would call a vow of poverty have a right to pray this prayer. Everyone praying this prayer must, as the message sinks in, end up taking a vow of poverty – that is, living from meal to meal from the charity of others.

I mention this because we must be neither oblivious to nor afraid of this approach and interpretation. It bothers me that some of you think this is what God would like you to do and yet you will not do it. If this is what God is asking of you, then doing it will lead you into greater happiness than you have ever known before.

I am truly convinced, however, that this is not the intended message for most people. I sincerely believe that if most people took the prayer this way and lived by this approach, starvation and poverty would decimate our species. There would be no one left to give. Jesus taught us better. He praised stewardship, befriended many rich people, and taught that it is better to give than to receive. Beggars are not good givers! But we do need to keep remembering that it is not a matter of amount. Most of us have learned that the amount of bread or earthly goods a person has does not have very much at all to do with how much trust they live by. This prayer reminds us constantly to place the future in God's hands; to live and respond to all that comes in the "now," today; to be alive and stay alive on a daily, one-day-at-a-time basis. If we try to deal with any more than that, it is too much for us. And it does not matter whether we have five, five hundred, or five million dollars – the principle is the same: trust God each day for the bread to go on with. (Except, of course, "*Every one to whom much is given, of him much will be required.*" (Luke 12:48))

This does not mean that I cannot plan for how to pay my taxes a year from now, if making that plan is part of today's legitimate agenda. But I cannot handle the anxiety of a year from now along with it. I can

only handle today's task, or I start to overload and get caught in fear and wheel-spinning anxiety. No matter how weak or strong you are, the same is true of you. With God's help and presence, we can handle today. Nobody handles more than that very well, for very long. Daily bread is one of the greatest practical principles of the Christian Life. Naturally – or we would not find it in the middle of the Lord's Prayer.

In this prayer, we request each day that we will receive the bread for going on. In this request, we assume that God has our survival in his hands, according to his plan for us. And so we stop worrying about it. If we are still worrying about it, we have not learned to pray this prayer.

If we trust this Lord and if we receive and pray His prayer every day, it will change our lives – singly and together – no doubt about it. But daily bread is about living one day at a time.