

*Our Father
Who art in heaven,
Hallowed be Thy name*

THEOLOGY AND

PRACTICE

OF
PRAYER



A Lutheran View

*Thy kingdom come
Thy will be done on
earth as it is in heaven
Give us this day our*

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Theology and Practice of Prayer: Abbreviations

AE	<i>Luther's Works</i> . American ed. 55 vols. St. Louis: Concordia and Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955–1986
Ap	Apology of the Augsburg Confession
KW	<i>The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church</i> , Edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000.
LC	The Large Catechism
LSB	<i>Lutheran Service Book</i> . The Commission on Worship of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. St. Louis: CPH, 2006.
NIV	New International Version of the Bible
RSV	Revised Standard Version of the Bible
SA	Smalcald Articles
SC	Small Catechism
WA	Luther, Martin. <i>Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe</i> . [Schriften.] 65 vols. Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1912–21.

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A Lutheran View

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Theology and Practice of Prayer

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Preface

In the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Philip Melancthon declared that in the churches of the Augsburg Confession, sermons avoided trivialities and dealt with central aspects of Christian life. Among them, he specifically mentioned prayer, “what it should be like and that everyone may be completely certain that it is efficacious and is heard.”¹ That prayer should be identified as a central aspect of Christian life and a topic for preaching and teaching, and then further defined regarding its manner and its certain efficacy, is no small matter. Consistent with that is a longstanding assignment on the agenda of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) to provide a study on the theology and practice of prayer.

One might think that prayer is so common that it needs no study. Christians pray throughout the world in churches, at home and work—or wherever they are. The generically “spiritual” pray. There is no lack of prayer in Hindu temples, Muslim mosques, Buddhist monasteries, and animist shrines. Arguably, even the secular atheist, as he inwardly mentions his hopes and desires to himself, is praying to the only “god” he knows.² Anyone who cares seems to know already about prayer. Why bother to study it?

The universality of prayer is the very reason that it requires theological consideration. All the world prays, but to gods of infinitely different conceptions. Even within Christian groups and churches there are often markedly different understandings of prayer. The assignment to the CTCR gave two reasons for a study of prayer: (1) the importance of prayer in Christian piety and (2) a tendency to speak of prayer as if it were a “means of grace.”³ This

¹ The topics he lists include: “repentance, fear of God, faith in Christ, the righteousness of faith, consolation of consciences through faith, the exercise of faith, *prayer (what it should be like and that everyone may be completely certain that it is efficacious and is heard)*, the cross, respect for the magistrates and all civil orders, the distinction between the kingdom of Christ (the spiritual kingdom) and political affairs, marriage, the education and instruction of children, chastity, and all the works of love” (emphasis added). Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 229. Future references to the *Book of Concord* will be to the Kolb-Wengert edition (KW) unless otherwise noted, abbreviating the title of the document and providing article, section, and page numbers.

² The atheist chaplain at Harvard University, humanist Greg Epstein, acknowledges this in *Good Without God: What a Billion Nonreligious People Do Believe* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 179–181.

³ The expression, “means of grace,” is shorthand in Lutheran theology for God’s Word and the Sacraments. E.g., see, SA III, 8, 10, KW, 323: “Therefore we should and must insist that God does

indicates both the need to encourage Christians to pray and also the potential for the Christian view of prayer to be misunderstood.

This study's goal is to encourage prayer and to guard against potential misunderstandings, from the standpoint of Lutheran theology. As such, this document is intentionally *theological* in nature (as distinct from "inspirational," "devotional," "practical," etc.). It is not a "how to" book on steps to a better prayer life. It is meant to be accessible to the catechized layperson, but it is directed especially to pastors, professional church workers, and lay leaders who regularly encounter questions about the underlying theological realities of prayer and seek to address them in sermons, Bible classes, evangelism calls, and religious conversations with Christians and non-Christians. It also focuses unapologetically on the *Lutheran* understanding of prayer. It frequently cites the Lutheran Confessions and the writings of Martin Luther for insight into scriptural realities about prayer. It regularly contrasts what Lutherans believe about prayer with the views of other Christians and other religions. It does this on the basis of the presupposition that a strong, healthy, God-pleasing prayer life is inseparable from a clear understanding of what the Bible actually teaches about prayer. Therefore the document draws heavily on Holy Scripture.

Lutheran theology is noteworthy for dualities: Law and Gospel, justification and sanctification, Word and Sacrament, kingdoms of the left and right hand. So also here, one may note a certain duality about prayer. Consider the following examples. Prayer is as instinctive and simple as a child's first words, yet it is taught and learned. One can pray freely in one's own words spoken straight from the heart (*ex corde*); and one can also pray in the words that flow straight from a book (the Bible, hymnals, prayer books). One can ask God for one's deepest desires; and one also prays that God would fulfill *His* will and not ours. Prayer is as easy as a breath, yet we often struggle to pray.

Because of such dualities, a Lutheran theology of prayer may seem somewhat different than a more "Evangelical"⁴ and informal perspective on the one hand or a more Roman Catholic and liturgical perspective on the other. In particular, Evangelicals are often noted for their emphasis on vigorous and free *ex corde* prayer. Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians are just as frequently identified by the use of traditional, formal prayer offices and practices. A Lutheran view of prayer respectfully values both approaches and does not pit one against the other. Instead, it encourages a middle way that includes and emphasizes both while it invites all to this treasure: "Let us pray."

not want to deal with us human beings, except by means of his external Word and sacrament." The concept is discussed in more detail later.

⁴ We are using the term "Evangelical" in its common, contemporary understanding as a reference to Christians and churches which give central emphasis to a personal commitment made as part of a conscious conversion experience, as well as such teachings as the inerrancy of Scripture and the obligation of personal evangelism.

Introduction

“Thank God,” writes Martin Luther in the Smalcald Articles, “a seven-year-old child knows what the church is, namely, holy believers and sheep who hear the voice of their Shepherd.”⁵

A seven-year-old child who knows what the church is surely also knows what prayer is. Prayer, as any little lamb of the Good Shepherd knows, is simply “talking to God.” Prayer is speaking to God in response to His speaking to us in His Word, just as sheep respond to the sound of the shepherd’s voice by “bleating back” to him their inarticulate expressions of gratitude, affection, and dependence.

And “so,” Luther goes on to say, “children pray, ‘I believe in one holy Christian church.’”⁶ Children not only know what prayer is, they also know how to pray. They pray the words of the Creed, joining together with other baptized children of God in confessing what God, through His Word, has taught them to believe. They pray at mealtime and at bedtime and throughout the day, thanking their Father in heaven for the daily gifts of His presence, provision, and protection. They pray the prayer that the Lord Jesus himself has given to all God’s children to pray, in which “God would encourage us to believe that he is truly our Father and we are truly his children in order that we may approach him boldly and confidently in prayer, even as beloved children approach their dear father.”⁷

In one sense, therefore, the subject of prayer is very simple, and for this—with Luther—we thank God. It is so simple, in fact, that (like the Gospel itself) its true nature, power and value are often hidden from those who are extolled as the “scholars” and “experts” of this world. “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth,” Jesus once prayed, “because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure” (Matt. 11:25–26).

But God’s children, whether age seven or seventy, also need to grow in faith and spiritual maturity. This means growing, too, in their understanding and practice of prayer. In this as in every other area of the Christian life, they need instruction and admonition, guidance and encouragement, direction and protection. After all, not every voice we hear today is the voice of the Good Shepherd—even among those voices that claim or intend to be speaking for God. And not everything that goes by the name of “prayer” today is in conformity with the teaching of Scripture regarding prayer. For these and many other reasons, God has included in his Word a vast treasure of comforting and trustworthy teaching concerning prayer. And God is pleased, and we are

⁵ SA III, 11, 2, KW, 324.

⁶ SA III, 11, 3, KW, 325.

⁷ SC, 3:2, KW, 356.

richly blessed, when with child-like humility and enthusiasm we search the Scriptures and plead, with the disciples, “Lord, teach us to pray!” (Luke 11:1).

Chapter One: What Is Prayer?

Prayer as a universal religious practice

The original meaning of the English⁸ word “pray” involves begging. To pray is “to plead” or “implore.”⁹ Humanity prays because of great need and distress. The beggar on the street hopes for help in poverty or need and pleads for it. But he is asking that help from strangers and is uncertain that any will respond. He cannot help but beg, yet he hates his circumstance and is alienated from the very people whose help he is begging. Their help is uncertain, even doubtful. He would rather not beg, but he seems to have no other choice.

There is an important parallel here to prayer in its common, religious context. According to standard dictionaries, prayer is “an address (as a petition) to God or a god in word or thought,”¹⁰ it is pleading or imploring addressed to divinity. As humans face their most desperate needs, they plead for help—begging not only one another, but also begging for help from a god or gods. Yet, like the street beggar, fallen humankind’s begging is uncertain, even doubtful. Here, too, alienation is at work, because humankind is fallen. Eden’s intimacy between a gracious God and His human creation has been lost. Humankind begs, but does so conscious of distance, uncertainty, and alienation. Are we begging the right god the right way? Is there even a god, or are we talking to ourselves? Does the one whose help we are begging care or even notice our misery? Such is our alienation.

The result is twofold. First, our need means that prayer never ends. It is “the oldest and most universal of all religious rites,” a rite that “has played a prominent role in all religious systems.”¹¹ “In one form or another, prayer is found everywhere, in all ages and among all people. The most discouraging circumstances do not crush it, and the most damaging ‘scientific’ theories do not prevent it.”¹²

⁸ The following comments are especially based on the English term “pray.” Neither the most precise Hebrew nor Greek terms that are translated as “to pray,” “prayer,” etc. are directly derived from the idea of begging. However, besides such specific verbs for praying, Hebrew also uses verbs for asking, begging, beseeching to refer to speaking to God in prayer, e.g., פָּדַל. Greek uses similar verbs for prayer (e.g., αἰτέω, δέομαι) to ask, to beg or plead, as well as the specific verb for to pray (προσεύχουμαι). See articles on prayer by H. Schönweiss in *The New International Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 2, Colin Brown, ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), 855–886. See also Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988), 407–409, and *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TDNT)*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1964), 775–816.

⁹ See “Pray,” *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004), 1423.

¹⁰ *Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, Mass: Merriam-Webster, 1990), 924.

¹¹ J.W. Acker, *Teach Us to Pray* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1960), 5.

¹² Ronald W. Goetsch, *Power through Prayer* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 11.

In the Old Testament, it is not just the people of Israel who pray. Israel's neighbors also bow their heads and raise their hands to a pantheon of gods that they believe (or hope) can help, deliver and defend them. In the New Testament, Paul encounters at the Areopagus zealous petitioners of "an unknown God," moving him to observe: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious" (Acts 17:22). Perhaps the best theological commentary on this encounter is Paul's own discourse in the book of Romans on the natural knowledge of God. "Ever since the creation of the world," he says, "[God's] invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made" (1:20). God's law (however skewed and shrouded by human sin) is "written on the hearts" of all people, leading even those who do not believe to accuse and excuse themselves on the basis of a moral code implanted by God himself (2:15). Reflecting on the implications of this biblical and universal truth, J. W. Acker concludes that

... the desire to pray is instinctive with man. As man's belief in the existence of the soul and in the reality of a hereafter seems to be innate, so there seems to be lodged in man's heart a natural impulse to pray. As naturally as the wing of a bird seeks flight or the fin of the fish takes to water, so the human heart yearns for a higher being, a god. Aware of his utter helplessness, man instinctively seeks help from his god or gods, especially in times of adversity and distress.¹³

God "has put eternity into man's heart," says the Preacher, "yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end" (Eccles. 3:11). Kenneth Korby asserts that "it is human to pray; and we acknowledge that much prayer, day and night, is carried on that is not in the name of Jesus." To be sure, he says, such "instinctual prayer," must "be distinguished from the prayer of faith." Yet there is clearly "a 'drivenness' in our creaturehood that gives humanity no surcease from praying. As praying Christians, seeking to fulfill our mission and destiny as God's church in the world, we need to understand this phenomenon."¹⁴

This "groping after God" through prayer, even when seriously misdirected, is actually a sign of the divinely-planted knowledge of God that still survives and surfaces in every human mind and heart. St. Paul might well respond to the surge of interest in "spirituality" in our society today much as he did in first-century Greece: "I see that in every way you are very religious!" "Very religious," yet Paul could not leave them as they were, for while their religiosity identified a very real need for God, neither our human groping after God nor our begging enable us to find or know God with confidence.

¹³ Acker, 5.

¹⁴ Kenneth E. Korby, "Prayer: Pre-Reformation to the Present," in *Christians at Prayer*, ed. John Gallen (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), 116–117.

So our human beggarliness before God also has a second result: the beggar's sense of alienation and doubt. Will anyone listen? Will anyone help? Is anyone there? Is there a god and does he, or she, or it, care? Our alienation from the real God means that humanly devised prayer—because of its uncertainties—inevitably attempts to bargain with God or the gods. It seeks a method, formula, mantra, sacrifice, posture, building—*something*—that will elicit a favorable response.

"Man is a beggar before God."¹⁵ Yet we do not know God unless He makes Himself known. Part of the purpose of this study, to be sure, is to identify and address deficiencies in "very religious" approaches to prayer that are not rooted in the pure teaching of the true God revealed in Holy Scripture (e.g. "Common Misunderstandings of Prayer" below). Yet, we do well to remember Paul's approach to worshippers of the "unknown God" in Athens. Unscriptural practices of prayer must be identified and rejected, but miserable sinners groping desperately after God must also be gently and lovingly pointed in the right direction: "What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you" (Acts 17:23). Paul's "urgent" admonition to Timothy seems fitting in this context, and applies also to us:

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all men. . . . This is good, and it is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all. . . . (1 Timothy 2:1–6).

We approach the subject of prayer in this study, of course, not merely on the basis of "dictionary definitions" but from the perspective of those who accept without reservation the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament as the written Word of God and the only rule and norm of faith and practice, and who affirm without qualification the confessional writings of *The Book of Concord* as a true and faithful exposition of God's Word. What is prayer, according to the clear and consistent witness of the Holy Scriptures? What is especially noteworthy and unique about the treatment of prayer offered in the Lutheran Confessions? And how do we apply the teaching of the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions regarding prayer to the questions and challenges facing God's people today in this area, so that their hearts and lives may be more deeply enriched and strengthened by the gift of prayer? These are the basic questions that form the parameters for this study.

¹⁵ St. Augustine, *Sermo* 56, 6, 9: *Patrologia Latina* 38, 381; cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1994) §2559.

Prayer as defined and described in Holy Scripture

We should note, first of all, that the Scriptures themselves do not provide us with a systematic, comprehensive definition of prayer. A wide assortment of Hebrew and Greek terms—both technical liturgical terms and common words for human discourse—is used to denote various aspects of the act of prayer in the Bible.¹⁶ Perhaps most striking is that much of Scripture’s description of and teaching about prayer, according to Patrick Miller, “places it in the category of ordinary discourse, often in situations of daily existence, some more critical than others.”¹⁷ Commonplace words for “saying” or “speaking,” when used in the context of “speaking to God,” become part of the vocabulary of prayer in the Bible. The frequent use of this “non-technical language” for prayer in the Bible “presses one toward a broader rather than narrower definition, to a way of speaking about prayer that we use in common parlance in a more popular way, that is *conversation with God*.”¹⁸ In a sense, therefore, the “dictionary definition” offered above also fits the Bible’s depiction of prayer, which suggests that the critical theological question is not so much “What is prayer?” but rather “Who is the God with whom we seek to converse?”

Definitions of prayer offered by Christian theologians down through the years reflect both the simplicity and profundity of Scripture’s treatment of prayer. As early as the second century after Christ, Clement of Alexandria defined prayer succinctly as “conversation and intercourse with God.”¹⁹ Most subsequent definitions have echoed Clement’s simple yet scriptural description of prayer, including the following by Luther: “All teachers of the Scriptures conclude that the essence and nature of prayer is nothing else than the lifting up of the heart or mind to God.”²⁰ “It is altogether Scriptural,” says the Lutheran theologian Francis Pieper, “to define prayer as ‘the conversation of the heart with God’ (Ps. 27:8), whether the heart alone communes with God without clothing the prayer in the words of the mouth or whether the mouth utters the prayer of the heart.”²¹ Martin Chemnitz explains that prayer is

. . . when we pour out our heart before God, and, coming thus to the throne of grace, address, with filial submission and true devotion of heart, God our Father, who is present

¹⁶ Patrick Miller provides a thorough discussion of the terminology used in the OT and the NT for communicating with the Deity, *They Cried to the Lord* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 32–42. Cp fn. 8, p.9 above.

¹⁷ Miller, 33.

¹⁸ Miller, 33. Interestingly, Miller also notes that “sharp distinctions in terminology between types of prayer—apart from the different sets of vocabulary belonging to petition and praise—do not exist. Intercession, petition, complaint, and confession may all take place under a variety of designations.”

¹⁹ See Goetsch, 19.

²⁰ AE 42:25.

²¹ F. Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 3 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), 77.

and hears and, both stirred up by his command and relying on his promise, we set before him our troubles and desires, in true faith, through and for the sake of Christ seeking mercy, grace, and help in the things that belong to his glory and are necessary, useful, and salutary for us or give him thanks for blessings received and praise and glorify his name.²²

As helpful as these definitions are, the Scriptures on which they are based seem less concerned with *defining* prayer than they do with urging and moving God's people to engage in the actual *practice* of prayer. From Moses' tantalizing hint of intimate communion and conversation between God and Adam and Eve "in the cool of the day" in the Garden of Eden (cf. Gen. 3:8), to St. Luke's agonizing portrayal of the incarnate God dripping with blood-like sweat as he offered up "prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears" in the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:44; Heb. 5:7), to St. John's glorious vision of—and fervent pleading for—the promised consummation of the prayers of God's people in the renewed and restored Garden of Eden (Rev. 7:9–17; 8:3–4; 22:1–6; 22:20), God's Word without ceasing invites and incites God's faithful people to pray.

"Pray," says Jesus to his disciples, "so that you will not fall into temptation" (Matt 26:41). "And pray in the Spirit," says Paul, "on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints. Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should" (Eph. 6:18–20, NIV). The early Christians, Luke tells us, "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42). James assures us that "the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective" (James 5:16), and Paul instructs Timothy, "I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling" (1 Tim. 2:8). John gives us a glimpse of the "prayers of the saints" rising up to the heavenly throne of the Lamb who was slain for the sins of the world (Rev. 5:8), and Peter soberly reminds us: "The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers" (1 Peter 4:7).

As this "scriptural sampler" on prayer illustrates, this "pouring out of the heart," this "lifting up of the heart or mind" to God, can take on many forms and can take place in a wide variety of settings. It can occur in the secrecy of one's closet or in the public assembly of the faithful gathered for worship. It can happen in the silence of one's heart or in the swelling chorus of the congregation's song. It can break forth spontaneously or be expressed in the practiced refrains of the church's liturgy. It can take the shape of praise, adora-

²² Martin Chemnitz, *Ministry, Word and Sacraments: An Enchiridion* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2007), 138.

tion and thanksgiving, confession (of sin), profession (of faith), intercession (for others), or petition (for one's self). In the Bible,

Holy place and private room, sanctuary and sickbed are all places of prayer. Set times and any time, morning and night are all times of prayer. The Scriptures identify prayer as an act that could be set in particular moments and places and routinized in definite ways. But it was not confined to such settings. Formality and fixity interchange with openness and freedom in the time and place of prayer.²³

Regardless of the type or circumstance of prayer, however, what needs to be emphasized first of all and above all is that *God-pleasing prayer in the Scriptures is always a response of the believer to the grace of God freely given in His Son Jesus Christ.*

The vital relationship between prayer and the Gospel

"If we want to learn to pray we must become like children. For that's who we really are, children of God through faith in Jesus Christ. Thus the first step in prayer is to step into the presence of God our loving Father as His beloved children. And there's only one way to do that: in the name of Jesus."²⁴ The Christian recognizes that prayer can never be separated from the incarnate Word and Lord by whom and through whom alone it is possible for sinners to stand in God's presence, to speak to Him and hope to be heard. "Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord; O Lord," pleads the Psalmist, "hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy. If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared" (Ps. 130:1–4). According to Scripture, however, "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (Heb. 9:22). Therefore it is only "by the blood of Jesus," by "the new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body," that we are privileged and invited to "draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith" (Heb. 10:19–22). Only by virtue of our adoption as God's children through our baptism into Christ's death and resurrection are we enabled to cry out "Abba, Father!" (Rom. 8:15). Only through the reconciling work of our high priest, Jesus, the Son of God, can we "approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (Heb. 4:16).

"Abraham believed God," says Paul, "and it was reckoned to him as righteousness" (Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4:3). In this righteousness—the righteousness of faith—Abraham and other Old Testament saints prayed and were heard (e.g., James 5:10–11, 13–18). David penned the greater part of the greatest prayer book in the Bible, which proclaims again and again "a blessing upon

²³ Miller, 50.

²⁴ Harold L. Senkbeil, *Dying to Live: The Power of Forgiveness* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992), 142.

the man to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works: ‘Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not reckon his sin’” (Rom. 4:6–8; cf. Ps. 32:1).

Prayer in the Scriptures, therefore, “has to do with a dawning awareness of God’s loving closeness in Christ (Eph. 3:14–21) and with our response to this in a variety of forms (e.g., praise, thanksgiving, petition, intercession, confession, self-offering).”²⁵ It is clearly “God’s loving closeness in Christ” that fills the heart and mind of St. Paul as he pours out his soul to God on behalf of his brothers and sisters in Christ in Ephesus:

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Eph. 3:14–21)

Paul’s words illustrate powerfully how impossible it is to understand, discuss or practice prayer as portrayed in the Scriptures apart from the Gospel of Christ through which the gift of prayer is freely given and to which it freely responds.

It is the claim of the gospel—and it was the discovery of the early church that that claim is true—that everything in our relation to God is and happens through Jesus Christ, in virtue of Jesus Christ, that the one who lived and died as God’s tabernacling among us (John 1:14) mediates every dimension of our life and death with God. So, surely, there fore, is every act of thanksgiving, every prayer of blessing, every supplication for others also *through Christ*.²⁶

For Lutherans the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone is central to faith. Luther called it “the chief article of our faith,” without which “the church cannot exist”²⁷—or, as it is often para-

²⁵ John Koenig, *Rediscovering New Testament Prayer* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992), 7.

²⁶ Miller, 318.

²⁷ AE 4:60: “This [teaching of salvation by grace alone and faith alone] is the chief article of our faith; and if you either do away with it, as the Jews do, or corrupt it, as the papists do, the

phrased, “the article on which the church stands or falls.” As such, it is vitally and organically related to every other teaching of Scripture, including Scripture’s teaching regarding prayer. The close connection between prayer and the Gospel is strongly emphasized in Luther and the Lutheran Confessions. “[T]rust in the divine promise and in the merits of Christ must provide the basis for prayer,” says the Apology. “For we must be completely certain that we are heard *on account of Christ* and that *by his merits* we have a gracious Father.”²⁸ In his exposition of Psalm 51, Luther reminds us that the God to whom David pours out his heart is not just any god, but the God who

. . . is dressed and clothed in His Word and promises, so that from the name “God” we cannot exclude Christ, whom God promised to Adam and the other patriarchs. We must take hold of this God, not naked but clothed and revealed in His Word; otherwise certain despair will crush us.²⁹

Non-believers, says Luther,

. . . speak with God outside His Word and promises, according to the thoughts of their own hearts; but the Prophets speak with God as He is clothed and revealed in His promises and Word. This God, clothed in such a kind appearance and, so to speak, such a pleasant mask, that is to say, dressed in His promises—this God we can grasp and look at with joy and trust.

This is the reason why the Prophets depended so upon God’s promises in their prayers, because the promises include Christ and make God not our judge or enemy, but a God who is kind and well disposed to us, who wants to restore life and save the condemned.³⁰

“It is impossible,” he says, “for a conscience to expect anything from God unless it first gains the conviction that God is gracious for Christ’s sake.”³¹

Therefore, as Korby reminds us, “although there is in our creature life an ‘instinct’ to pray,” “there is nothing merely ‘natural’ about Christian prayer.”³² Rather, it is made possible by the divine, faith-creating activity of God’s Spirit working through the Gospel. Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes:

church cannot exist.”

²⁸ Ap XXI, 20, KW, 240; emphasis added.

²⁹ AE 12:312.

³⁰ AE 12:312–313.

³¹ *What Luther Says: An Anthology*, Ewald M. Plass (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 1079.

³² Korby, 114.

It is a dangerous error, surely very widespread among Christians, to think that the heart can pray by itself. For then we confuse wishes, hopes, sighs, laments, rejoicing—all of which the heart can do by itself—with prayer. And we confuse earth and heaven, man and God. Prayer does not mean simply to pour out one's heart. It means rather to find the way to God and speak with him, whether the heart is full or empty. No man can do that by himself. For that he needs Jesus Christ.³³

"Only in Jesus Christ," he says, "are we able to pray, and with him we also know that we shall be heard."³⁴ Those who "grope after God" in their instinctual prayers need to be pointed to Christ so that they can truly understand and benefit from God's great and gracious gift of prayer.

As Jesus Christ makes it possible to pray, those who are in Christ are continually at prayer. "Pray without ceasing," wrote Paul to the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 5:17). This is not an encouragement to repeat, thoughtlessly and incessantly, rehearsed religious formulas or spontaneous spiritual sentiments in the hopes of "making points" with God or moving him to action. In fact, Jesus explicitly warned against such attempts to manipulate God and impress others (Matt. 6:7), which are contrary to the spirit of the Gospel on which prayer is based. What Paul's words to the Thessalonians mean to encourage is a life and attitude of continual dependence upon God the Father and the regular expression of this dependence in prayerful words, thoughts and deeds. Luther describes it this way:

Where there is a Christian, there is the Holy Ghost, who is always engaged in prayer. For though the Christian does not continually move his lips to utter words, nevertheless the heart is beating and pulsing, like the arteries and the heart in the body, unceasingly sighing: O dear Father, may Thy name be hallowed, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done among us and all people, etc. And as the attacks, trials, and troubles press and crowd harder, also such sighing and begging becomes more urgent, even audible. So, then, you can not find a Christian who is not always praying, as little as a living person is without a pulse, which never rests, but beats continuously, though the person may be sleeping or is occupied otherwise, so that he is not aware of its beating.³⁵

³³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1970), 9–10.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

³⁵ AE 24:89.

Common misunderstandings of prayer

If prayer is a gift of and a response to the Gospel, then it is also possible (and necessary) to offer some observations about what prayer is not. In contrast to humanly-devised forms and concepts of prayer (both ancient and modern), God-pleasing prayer in the Bible is never an attempt to merit His favor, or induce Him to action by means of human efforts, promises, persuasion, or through some “magical” or mechanical incantation or formula. Rather, God-pleasing prayer in Scripture always *begins with* and is *rooted in* the unearned grace and favor of God. God’s gracious words, acts, and promises induce those who trust in Him to pray. Prayer is a “sacrifice of praise” in response to God’s grace, “the fruit of lips that confess his name” (Heb. 13:15). Prayer is the response of the repentant sinner who has received the full and free forgiveness of his merciful God and Father, and who is moved by the Spirit to express—inwardly or outwardly, privately or corporately—thanks, needs, and requests. “We have sinned and done wrong and acted wickedly and rebelled,” confesses Daniel in his prayer for Judah and Israel. “To thee, O Lord, belongs righteousness, but to us open shame” (Dan. 9:7). Yet for the sake of God’s own holy name, placed by grace upon his people, Daniel is bold to pray:

O my God, incline your ear and hear. Open your eyes and see our desolations, and the city that is called by your name. For we do not present our pleas before you because of our righteousness, but because of your great mercy. O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive. O Lord, pay attention and act. Delay not, for your own sake, O my God, because your city and your people are called by your name. (Daniel 9:18–19)

It is also important to emphasize that although prayer in the Scriptures is rooted and grounded in God’s grace, prayer itself is not a *means* of grace. By itself, prayer is not a practice by which we are brought into or maintained in a saving relationship with God. To confuse prayer with the “means of grace”—to place it on par with the Word and Sacraments of Christ—undermines the very confidence that enables a prayerful response to our gracious God. It risks confusion about the essential fact that salvation and Christian life are always dependent on God’s gracious initiative and His ongoing, sanctifying work. To remember that we are adopted as God’s children and preserved in that saving relationship *entirely and only by God* is the sure basis for confident prayer. It frees us to share with Him all our fears, weaknesses, and sins—even sins and weaknesses in our prayer life—as well as our joys and praise. Prayer *responds* to the Gospel by seeking more and more of the Gospel’s gifts, and God answers these prayers by pouring out these gifts through the Gospel itself.³⁶

³⁶ The Lutheran Confessions are aware that the term “sacrament” (literally, “holy thing”), broadly defined, might be applied to many God-pleasing activities, including prayer. “Finally, if everything that has the command of God and some promise added to it ought to be counted

It is common and sometimes helpful to speak about prayer in the context of a “conversation with God,” but this can also be confusing. Some are then troubled because they pray sincerely, and do not “hear” an answer. They long for the Lord to speak directly, apart from any mediation, just as occurred to some biblical saints (e.g., Gen. 7:1; 12:1). The absence of such an unmediated word leaves them desolate. Or, perhaps they sense an answer, but wonder whether it is authentic. It is helpful to remember that prayer is the human side of a “conversation with God.” “Inner voices” may be the word of conscience or a sanctified, Spirit-led heart, but they may also be a voice of confusion or falsehood. What is vital is to know that any answer that we hear or sense cannot stand on its own, but is always subject to the revealed Word of Scripture. There we are assured we hear God’s voice. No inner voice has such authority.

This requires us to keep God’s Word and prayer together. Christian worship in its various forms—from individual to corporate and from informal to formal—inevitably involves both the Word of God *and* prayer. In that way the worshiper really is part of a two-way “conversation.” We speak *and* we listen. We hear God’s Word in unambiguous, authoritative words, and we speak and sing our words as response. Our personal prayer life needs this same dynamic. For good reason, therefore, Christians through the ages have been encouraged to practice a devotional life that involves Scripture and prayer. In such ways our lives, too, may be “made holy by the word of God and prayer” (1 Tim. 4:5).

Moreover, the close connection between the Word and prayer is made most explicit when we pray those prayers which are themselves the very Word of God, the prayers of Scripture. When we use God’s Word in our prayers, of course, this Word in and of itself—without our aid and assistance—continues to function as a means of grace by the power of God’s Holy Spirit. Perhaps the most obvious example of this “praying back to God his own words” occurs whenever we pray the Lord’s Prayer. This prayer, given by the Lord himself, is always and everywhere

... the gracious Word of Christ to us, His work and His gift.
This precious thing is not of our own fabrication or design,
nor is it anything that we could have thought or imagined. . . .
And when we pray in this manner, it does not cease to be His
Word and His work in us. Not that our praying is the Gospel

a sacrament, why not include prayer, which can most truly be called a sacrament? For it has the command of God, and it has many promises. Were it included among the sacraments, as though in a more exalted position, it would encourage people to pray” (Ap 13, 16–17, KW, 221). By this definition, many other aspects of the Christian life containing God’s command and promise could also be called “sacraments.” The point of Ap XIII, however, is not to “argue much about the number or the terminology” of the sacraments (17, KW, 221), but to determine what can be rightly called a “sacrament” if this term is defined as rites that “have the command of God and the promise of grace, which is the essence of the New Testament” (Ap XI, 4; KW, 219). According to this “the genuine sacraments. . . are Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and absolution.” While many promises of God are attached to prayer in the Scriptures, God does not promise that on account of our prayers He will forgive us and grant us grace.

or a means of grace; but the words themselves, with which the Lord has opened our lips to call upon His name, these are indeed a gift of pure Gospel and grace.³⁷

On the other hand, and at the same time, “our praying of the *Our Father* . . . is a genuine good work of faith, a sacrifice of repentance and thanksgiving, and an act of worship in Spirit and Truth.”³⁸ In fact, any act of worship, to the extent that it involves and incorporates God’s own words and promises of grace, becomes both our work (pleasing to God) and God’s work toward us and in us. “Every act of adoration, confession, thanksgiving and supplication is also a work of proclamation to the one who worships.”³⁹ When we sing and pray God’s Word in our worship, we also proclaim to ourselves and others the Gospel that enables us to sing, pray, and worship in the name of Jesus.

If prayer is a response to the Gospel, it follows that prayer is not to be directed anywhere but to the God of the Gospel, the Triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The individual persons of the Trinity may, of course, be addressed specifically in prayer. At the moment of his death Stephen cries out: “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit” (Acts 7:59). Paul pleads directly with Christ “the Lord” (*kyrios*) in his time of intense suffering and need (2 Cor 12:8). The apostle also instructs Christians to “pray at all times in the Spirit” (Eph. 6:18), and many hymns are actually prayers to the Spirit: “Holy Spirit, light divine, Shine upon this heart of mine; Chase the shades of night away, Turn the darkness into day.”⁴⁰

All prayers to the true God, of course, ultimately involve all members of the Trinity. The Holy Spirit moves and teaches us to pray to the Father in the name and for the sake of Christ. However fervent or sincere they may be, therefore, prayers to other so-called “gods” or spiritual intermediaries (including angels) are misdirected and are forbidden by God in his Word (Ex 20:4; Is 44:6–20; Rom 1:25). Even as God warns against such prayers, however, He lovingly pleads with those whose misguided petitions reflect an inner craving for Him who alone can hear and answer prayer: “Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other...To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear” (Is. 45:22–23).⁴¹

³⁷ D. Richard Stuckwisch, “Lord, Remember us in Your Kingdom, and Teach Us to Pray” in *We Believe: Essays on the Catechism* (Ft. Wayne, IN: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 2000), 70.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ George W. Hoyer, “Worshiping Pastors and Worshiping People,” in *Toward a More Excellent Ministry*, Richard R. Caemmerer and Alfred O. Fuerbringer, eds. (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary, 1964), 136.

⁴⁰ *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 496:1.

⁴¹ To the question whether God “hears” the prayers of those who do not believe in the Triune God, the answer depends on what is meant by the word “hear.” In divine omniscience and omnipresence, God sees and “hears” everything—including all prayers to false gods and all

It must also be said that those who trust in the one true God are not instructed anywhere in Scripture to pray to Mary or the saints of heaven, or given any promise that such prayers will be heard or answered by them or by God.⁴² Only in the name of Christ do we have access to the heavenly King, whom we call “our Father” through Christ our Brother (John 14:13–14; Heb. 4:14–16; 2:11; Matt. 6:9). And only in the name of Jesus, the name above all names, the name at which every knee in heaven and on earth and under the earth will bow (Phil. 2:9–10), does Scripture instruct and invite us to pray.

Emphasis on the saving initiative and gracious work of God may lead us to think that prayer is somehow incidental or optional for the Christian. If the Christian life is a gift of grace, why work at it—why work at prayer? After all, as noted above (in several places), it is God the Holy Spirit who moves us to pray in response to His grace in Christ Jesus. The Bible even speaks of God the Holy Spirit “helping us” in our prayers by “interceding for us with groanings too deep for words” (Rom. 8:26). This is a wonderful, mysterious assurance of God’s gracious presence and assistance in our deepest times of need. Yet, it is *not* an excuse not to concern ourselves with the hard work of prayer. “The fact that the Spirit speaks in us,” says Oscar Cullmann,

... does not mean that we are uninvolved; on the contrary, it is precisely for this reason that we should seek conversation with God. For the fact that the Holy Spirit now already renews us ‘from day to day’ (2 Cor. 4:16) does not excuse us from making our own contributions, so that all our thought and action is influenced by it.⁴³

Scriptural promises and encouragement to pray may also sometimes lead to misunderstandings. Our Lord promises: “Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son” (John 14:13). Some suggest that Jesus has here promised that anyone who truly believes in Him can name whatever he wants and God will simply give it—as long as the phrase “in Jesus’ name” appears (as if it were a mantra). Such “name it and claim it” teaching is a deception that often leads to doubt in God’s Word and despair of His mercy in those who ask, but do not receive.

To do anything “in the name” of another is never an invitation to claim our will and desires above that person’s will and desires. To pray “in Jesus’

prayers wrongly prayed. However, the word “hear” in scriptural teaching on prayer often denotes God’s favorable reception of prayers and his promise to respond in accordance with his gracious will in Christ Jesus. This promise and assurance can be claimed only by those who have received the gift of faith in Jesus Christ, in whom alone all of God’s promises find their “Yes” (2 Cor. 1:20).

⁴² For further discussion, see the CTCR’s report, *A Response to “The U.S. Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue Report VII: The One Mediator, the Saints, and Mary”* (1994), found online at www.lcms.org/ctcr.

⁴³ Oscar Cullmann, *Prayer in the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 80–81.

name” is to confess Him as Lord. To be invited and urged by Him to pray is an invitation to pray in faith and so to pray as Jesus prays, not in a spirit that is antithetical to Him. It is the prayers of those who abide in Him and in His words that He promises to grant. To pray for evil cannot be done “in Jesus’ name,” for He will not be a party to our curses (Luke 6:28; James 3:9–10) nor does He encourage our envy and greed (Matt. 16:24–26).

Jesus’ well-known story contrasting the proud prayer of the Pharisee with the humble plea of a repentant tax collector (Luke 18:10–14) reminds us that prayer in Jesus’ name cannot be an exercise in egotism. Exaggerated claims by those who suggest that they have a special “pipeline to God” which gives their prayers a unique power to work miracles are misplaced at best and arrogant at worst. The “power of prayer” is often viewed and discussed in confusing ways. Whatever else the phrase may mean, this much is certain: Christian prayer seeks the loving power of *God*, and does so with legitimate confidence because it knows Him as Father through Jesus Christ, the Son. Our confidence in prayer is confidence in God. That God can and does help and heal His suffering children in response to prayer is a fact of Scripture and experience, but *He* does the healing, not prayer itself, and He does it according to His good and gracious will. Luther warned of prayers that “are concerned more with our honor than with God’s.”⁴⁴ Athanasius, writing about one of his heroes in the faith who was noteworthy for healings, explained where the power to heal lies: “Antony, then, healed not by giving out commands, but by praying and by calling upon Christ’s name, so that it was clear to all that it was not he who did this, but the Lord showing His loving-kindness to men and curing sufferers through Antony.”⁴⁵ Note that Athanasius corrects a misunderstanding of the source of healing, and so *encourages* prayer for such special signs of kindness from God. Similarly, the cautions herein are not intended to discourage fervent and persistent prayers to God for healing and for all other blessings of body, mind, and soul.

Prayer, then, is a solemn and joyous act of worship flowing from true faith in and gratitude for the gift of God’s Son, Jesus Christ. It is an ongoing *response* to God’s grace that encompasses a believer’s whole life and being and the whole life and being of the church. There are, of course, other responses to the Good News of God’s undeserved love in Jesus Christ. Other aspects of the Christian life also flow from the thankful heart of the believer in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit at work through the means of grace. But prayer is of such significance as a distinguishing mark of the sanctified life that Luther can say: “After the preaching of the Gospel whereby God speaks to us, this is the greatest and foremost work, that by prayer we in turn speak to God.”⁴⁶

⁴⁴ AE, 42:21.

⁴⁵ Athanasius, *The Life of Saint Antony*, tr. Robert T. Meyer, Ancient Christian Writers (New York: Newman Press, 1950), 89 (§84).

⁴⁶ WA 46, 81.

Chapter Two: Why Do Christians Pray?

Prayer and the “paradox” of Law and Gospel

To answer the question “What is prayer?” is also, in a sense, to answer the question “What is the purpose of prayer?” or “Why should I pray?” For if prayer is, in fact, a Spirit-generated response of faith to God’s undeserved love in Jesus Christ, if it is a continual and unceasing sighing and crying out to the Father on whom we depend for every aspect of our existence as God’s children, then it is difficult to imagine a believer requesting or requiring a list of “reasons” to explain or justify the activity of prayer. No one ever asks (to use Luther’s analogies for prayer), “What is the purpose of breathing?” or “Why should I allow my heart to beat?”

And yet it is to this very question—the question “Why should I pray?”—that we turn our attention in this section. In doing so we have opportunity to reflect once again on the intimate relationship between prayer and the Gospel. The question “Why should I pray?” prods us to probe and ponder the seemingly paradoxical teaching of Scripture regarding the dual nature of the Christian as *simul iustus et peccator*,⁴⁷ and the Christian’s continual need to hear the dual (and seemingly paradoxical) voice of God as He speaks to his people in words of both Law and Gospel.

One of the most theologically lucid and, at the same time, practical and pastoral discussions of the purpose of prayer is Martin Luther’s introduction to the exposition of the Lord’s Prayer in *The Large Catechism*. Before commenting “part by part” (or petition by petition), Luther says, “the most necessary thing is to exhort and encourage the people to prayer, as Christ and the apostles also did.”⁴⁸

It should be noted, first of all, that “the most necessary thing” to which Luther refers assumes the relevance of the question, “Why should I pray?” If God’s people were not (outwardly or inwardly) struggling with this question, it would not be necessary to “exhort and encourage” them to prayer. And the “first thing to know” with regard to this question “is this: It is our duty to pray because of God’s command.”⁴⁹ By this Luther refers to God’s command against the vain use of his name (Ex. 20:7).

Thereby we are required to praise the holy name and to pray or call upon it in every need. For calling upon it is nothing else than praying. Prayer, therefore, is as strictly and solemnly commanded as all the other commandments. . . . This God

⁴⁷ Both saint and sinner at the same time.

⁴⁸ LC 3, 4, KW, 441. In a footnote, KW lists the following passages for reference and study: Matt. 7:7; Luke 18:1, 21:36; Rom. 12:12; Col. 4:2; 1 Thess. 5:17; 1 Tim. 2:1; James 1:6, 5:13; 1 Peter 4:8; Jude 20.

⁴⁹ LC 3, 5, KW, 441.

requires of us; it is not a matter of our choice. It is our duty and obligation to pray if we want to be Christians.⁵⁰

These words raise an important question: Is “the first thing to know about prayer” (as Luther argues here) that “God has commanded it,” or is the first thing to know about prayer (as was argued in the previous section) that it is a response of faith to God’s grace in Christ Jesus?

In seeking to answer this question, we need to pay close attention (first of all) to the context in which Luther offers these comments on prayer in *The Large Catechism*. Luther’s discussion of the Lord’s Prayer in *The Large Catechism* is placed very intentionally *after* careful and thorough treatments of the Ten Commandments (part one of the catechism) and the Apostles’ Creed (part two). Accordingly, Luther begins the section on the Lord’s Prayer by stating: “We have heard what we are to do and to believe. . . . Now follows the third part, how we are to pray.”

The Ten Commandments tell us “what we are to do.” At the same time, they expose our complete inability—apart from God’s power and mercy—to do “what we are to do.” Luther concludes his discussion of the tenth and final commandment by emphasizing that “this commandment remains, like all the rest, one that constantly accuses us and shows just how upright we really are in God’s sight”⁵¹—how completely lacking we are in true righteousness. Those who regard the Commandments as a set of easy-to-follow rules for attaining favor with God and man “fail to see . . . that no one is able to keep even one of the Ten Commandments as it ought to be kept.”⁵² “Both the Creed and the Lord’s Prayer must come to our aid, as we shall hear later. Through them we must seek and pray for help and receive it continually.”⁵³

The first and most important help comes from the Creed. The commandments show us “all that God wishes us to do or not to do.” The Creed shows us “all that we must expect and receive from God.”⁵⁴ In the Creed “we see how God the Father has given himself to us, with all his creatures, has abundantly provided for us in this life, and, further, has showered us with inexpressible eternal treasures through His Son and the Holy Spirit.”⁵⁵ In the Creed we learn how Jesus, our Lord, “has snatched us, poor lost creatures, from the jaws of hell, won us, made us free, and restored us to the Father’s favor and grace.”⁵⁶

⁵⁰ LC 3, 6, 8, KW, 441.

⁵¹ LC 1, 310, KW, 427.

⁵² LC 1, 316, KW, 428.

⁵³ LC 1, 316, KW, 428.

⁵⁴ LC 2, 1, KW, 431.

⁵⁵ LC 2, 24, KW, 433.

⁵⁶ LC 2, 30, KW, 434.

In the Creed we learn how God has sent the Holy Spirit “to offer and apply to us this treasure of salvation” through the Word and the sacraments.⁵⁷

For in all three articles God himself has revealed and opened to us the most profound depths of his fatherly heart and his pure, unutterable love. . . . [W]e could never come to recognize the Father’s favor and grace were it not for the LORD Christ, who is a mirror of the Father’s heart. Apart from him we see nothing but an angry and terrible judge. But neither could we know anything of Christ, had it not been revealed by the Holy Spirit.⁵⁸

It is only at this point—having laid bare the threats and demands of the Law and having exulted in the gifts and promises of the Gospel—that Luther is ready and able to talk about prayer. It is true that when Luther does talk about prayer in *The Large Catechism* he speaks of it as a command of God, “as strictly and solemnly commanded as all the other commandments.” But it is also true that Luther clearly and intentionally sets the discussion of this command in the context of the Gospel which he has just (in part two) finished extolling. The very structure of *The Large Catechism* allows (and even requires) us to say, therefore, that for Luther, too, “the first thing to know” about prayer is its relationship to the Gospel, since apart from the Gospel there would and could be no such thing as true, God-pleasing prayer. Without parts one and two of the catechism, there would be no part three. Without the Lord who came to reconcile us to the Father, there would be no Lord’s Prayer, no possibility of addressing God as “Our Father.” Nor could we ever pray, “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us,” apart from the manger, the cross, and the open tomb of the only Savior of the world, Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, as we will see, Luther in *The Large Catechism* does much more than simply remind us *that* God has commanded prayer. He also tells us *why* God commands it, and in so doing he explains how prayer, along with the Creed, is also a gift of a gracious God meant not to burden us or to make our lives more difficult, but (on the contrary!) to “help us”⁵⁹ in ways that we could never help ourselves.

Why God urges us to pray

By graciously and wisely commanding us to pray, God gives us, first, a powerful tool and a weapon in our ongoing struggle—against the devil, the world, and our flesh—to live in obedience to God and his commands (which are themselves intended for our spiritual and temporal blessing).

⁵⁷ LC 2, 38, KW, 436.

⁵⁸ LC 2, 64-65, KW, 439-440.

⁵⁹ LC 1, 316, KW, 428.

We are in such a situation that no one can keep the Ten Commandments perfectly, even though he or she has begun to believe. Besides, the devil, along with the world and our flesh, resists them with all his power. Consequently, nothing is so necessary as to call upon God incessantly and to drum into his ears our prayer that he may give, preserve, and increase in us faith and the fulfillment of the Ten Commandments and remove all that stands in our way and hinders us in this regard.⁶⁰

Luther's words here call to mind the stirring exhortation of St. Paul in Ephesians 6, where fellow-soldiers of Christ are urged to "be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might," to "put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil" (Eph. 6:10-11). Sometimes overlooked in this vivid description of the "panoply of God" is that vital piece of equipment called prayer, which Paul mentions repeatedly in the closing verses of this section, urging the church to:

[Pray] at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, and also for me, that words may be given me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak. (Eph. 6:18-20)

Here prayer is linked to the Gospel in a dual sense: (1) the Spirit who brings us to faith in the Gospel stirs us and moves us to pray (v. 18), and (2) foremost among the petitions which we lay before the Lord in prayer is a plea for courage and boldness on the part of those who are engaged in the task of proclaiming the Gospel (v. 19).

God has given us the gift of prayer, says Luther, so that we may know and have the way to call upon Him for help to do the things He has commanded us to do, and so that, in turn, He Himself may bless us and others in our doing of them. But how can we know for sure that God will accept us and receive our prayer? How can we poor sinners presume to enter into his holy presence? What right do we have to ask or expect God to give us any good thing?

Here again, and in a way that may surprise the reader who is perhaps too easily inclined to expect a simple "Gospel" answer to these questions, Luther finds great comfort in the fact that God himself has *commanded* us to pray. Prayer is not something that we have devised or created as a means of influencing or manipulating God. We do not come to God in prayer on our own initiative or on the basis of our own goodness or worthiness. We come, says Luther, because God has instructed us, urged us, and yes, even *commanded* us

⁶⁰ LC 3, 2, KW 440-441.

to come. And yet his commandments “are not burdensome” (1 John 5:3) when viewed in the context of his grace in Christ.

Indeed, the human heart is by nature so desperately wicked that it always flees from God, thinking that he neither wants nor cares for our prayers because we are sinners and have merited nothing but wrath. Against such thoughts, I say, we should respect this commandment and turn to God so that we may not increase his anger by such disobedience. By this commandment he makes it clear that he will not cast us out or drive us away, even though we are sinners; he wishes rather to draw us to himself so that we may humble ourselves before him, lament our misery and plight, and pray for grace and help.⁶¹

Our problem, says Luther, is that

We allow ourselves to be impeded and deterred by such thoughts as these: “I am not holy enough or worthy enough; if I were as righteous and holy as St. Peter or St. Paul, then I would pray.” Away with such thoughts! The very commandment that applied to St. Paul also applies to me. The Second Commandment is given just as much on my account as on his. He can boast of no better or holier commandment than I . . .

This is the first and most important point, that all our prayers must be based on obedience to God, regardless of our person, whether we are sinners or righteous people, worthy or unworthy. We must understand that God is not joking, but that he will be angry and punish us if we do not pray, just as he punishes all other kinds of disobedience.⁶²

In part three of *The Large Catechism*, the command always comes first, as Law comes before Gospel. Thus the command to pray, like all commands, always functions for the Christian both as a “mirror” (showing us our sins and failures) and as a “guide” (showing us how to respond properly and faithfully to God’s love in Christ). In both cases, however, this command must also be viewed in its proper relationship to the Gospel: it drives us to the cross of Christ for forgiveness for our disobedience, and at the same time it shows us—in the light of the cross which compels us to live gladly and willingly as God’s children—what the good and gracious will of our heavenly Father is in this area of the Christian life. It should not surprise us, therefore, that Luther finds a Gospel promise “hidden” in God’s very command to pray: “Nor will he allow our prayers to be frustrated or lost,” he goes on to say, “for if he did

⁶¹ LC 3, 10–11, KW, 441–442.

⁶² LC 3, 15, KW, 442.

not intend to answer you, he would not have ordered you to pray and backed it up with such a strict commandment.”⁶³

What is “hidden” becomes explicit in the next section of the catechism, where Luther offers a second compelling reason for prayer:

. . . God has made and affirmed a promise: that what we pray is a certain and sure thing. As he says in Psalm 50[15], “Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you,” and Christ says in the Gospel of Matthew 7[:7–8] “Ask, and it will be given you,” etc. . . . “For everyone who asks receives.” *Such promises certainly ought to awaken and kindle in our hearts a longing and love for prayer. For by his Word, God testifies that our prayer is heartily pleasing to him and will assuredly be heard and granted, so that we may not despise it, cast it to the winds, or pray uncertainly.* You can hold such promises up to him and say, “Here I come to Thee, dear Father, and pray not of my own accord nor because of my own worthiness, but at your commandment and promise, which cannot fail or deceive me.”⁶⁴

In an Eastertide sermon on the words of Jesus in John 16:23—“Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you”—Luther maintains that God’s promise is “the chief thing” and “the foundation and power of all prayers.” In this verse, says Luther, God not only *promises* He will hear and answer our prayers, He actually *swears* that He will do so: “Verily, verily, I say unto you . . .” (John 16:23).

If it were not for this promise, who would have courage to pray? We have hitherto resorted to many ways of preparing ourselves to pray—ways with which the books are filled; but if you wish to be well prepared, take the promise and lay hold of God with it. Then your courage and desire to pray will soon grow, which courage you will otherwise never get.⁶⁵

Alongside God’s command and God’s promise, Luther adds yet a third reason to pray: God’s provision of the “perfect prayer” by which we can obey His command and put His promises to the test. “Furthermore, we should be encouraged and drawn to pray because, in addition to this commandment and promise, God takes the initiative and puts into our mouths the very words and approach we are to use.” Luther is, of course, speaking of the Lord’s Prayer, which is “far superior to all others that we might devise ourselves.” Because this prayer comes from the lips of our Lord Jesus himself, and because He himself has instructed us to pray in this way, we need never think: “I have prayed,

⁶³ LC 3, 17–19, KW, 443.

⁶⁴ LC 3, 19–21, KW, 443, emphasis added.

⁶⁵ *Sermons of Martin Luther*, ed. John Nicholas Lenker, trans. by Lenker and others, Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), 168.

but who knows whether it pleased him, or whether I have hit upon the right form and mode? Thus, there is no nobler prayer to be found” than the Lord’s Prayer, “for it has the powerful testimony that God loves to hear it. This we should not trade for all the riches in the world.”⁶⁶

We will speak more of the Lord’s Prayer in the next section, where we will discuss how we should pray. At this point, however, it is worth noting that while the Lord’s Prayer is indeed the “noblest prayer on earth,” it is not the only example of how God has “put into our mouths the very words we are to use” when we pray. There is, in fact, an entire book of Scripture that has rightly been called “the prayer book of the Bible,” the book of Psalms. As noted above there is always a close connection between biblical prayer and the Word itself. That connection becomes a complete unity as we pray not only according to, but *in God’s very own words*, whether that is the Psalter or the Lord’s Prayer. That is the basis of Luther’s serene confidence about this “third reason” to pray.

There is, finally, a fourth reason for prayer given in *The Large Catechism*, and if it is not the most theologically sublime reason, it is perhaps the most obvious and even (humanly speaking) the most compelling reason. Prayer “has been prescribed for this reason also,” says Luther, “that we should reflect on our need, which ought to drive and compel us to pray without ceasing.”⁶⁷ Deeply-felt needs produce deeply-felt prayers, pleasing to God.

[W]here there is to be true prayer there must be utter earnestness. We must feel our need, the distress that drives and impels us to cry out. Then prayer will come spontaneously, as it should, and no one will need to be taught how to prepare for it or how to create the proper devotion.⁶⁸

Spontaneity in prayer does not imply, of course, a spurning of the divinely-prepared and prescribed prayers of Scripture. Indeed, genuine human need,

is something you will find richly enough in the Lord’s Prayer. Therefore it may serve to remind us and impress upon our hearts that we not neglect to pray. For we are all lacking plenty of things: all that is missing is that we do not feel or see them. God therefore wants you to lament and express your needs and concerns, not because he is unaware of them, but in order that you may kindle your heart to stronger and greater desires and spread your apron wide to receive many things.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ LC 3, 22–23, KW, 443.

⁶⁷ LC 3, 24, KW, 443.

⁶⁸ LC 3, 26, KW, 444.

⁶⁹ LC 3, 27, KW, 444.

So—why should I pray? What is the purpose of prayer? To summarize, for Luther in *The Large Catechism* it is a four-fold answer. We should pray, first, because God has commanded it. Like all of God’s commands, this command is not to be taken lightly, since it is accompanied by serious warnings and threats of punishment for those who disobey. But for the Christian—for the one who knows this demanding God also as loving Father in Jesus Christ—there is also reason to rejoice in this command. We know God really does want to hear our prayer, and accepts it despite our unworthiness, and that He will use it to help us in our ongoing efforts and struggle to live a life that is pleasing to Him and beneficial to others.

We should pray, second, because God has promised to hear and answer our prayers. God does not lie: not once has He broken even one of His many promises. So we can be sure, with Christ as our guarantee, that He will keep this promise as well, regardless of whether His answer to our prayers always corresponds to our human desires or expectations.

We should pray, third, because God has put into our very mouths and hearts the words we are to use: above all, the Lord’s Prayer, but along with it and encompassed in it every other God-pleasing expression of praise and thanksgiving, petition and intercession, confession of sin and profession of faith.

And we should pray, finally, because of our many needs (and the needs of others, which, through love, become our needs and burdens as well). In the seven petitions of the Lord’s Prayer “are comprehended all the needs that continually beset us, each one so great that it should impel us to keep praying for it all our lives.”⁷⁰ At the same time, they ought to remind us every day of the tender mercy and abundant grace of our heavenly Father, who has promised to supply our every need “according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:19).

Prayer and the paradox of influencing an immutable God

Even in light of the foregoing discussion, questions remain about the purpose of prayer that stretch and even surpass the limits of human understanding. It is clear that prayer helps and benefits us for the reasons discussed above: it drives us to God’s Word and promises in Christ, it reminds us of our dependence on God and our constant need for His help, forgiveness, and deliverance. It provides us with a powerful weapon to use against the devil, the world, and our flesh. It prods us to reflect not only on our own needs but on the needs and burdens of others in the church and in the world. It gives us a means of exercising and expressing our faith in the One who has created, redeemed and sanctified us. Prayer, when we use it properly and faithfully, surely changes us. Does it, however, actually “do something” to influence God’s divine will, plans, decrees, intentions, and actions?

⁷⁰ LC 3, 34, KW, 445.

Discussions of God's attributes invariably include reference to His divine immutability, based on scriptural statements such as "I the Lord do not change" (Mal 3:6) and "God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind" (Num. 23:19; cf. 1 Sam. 15:29). "Jesus Christ," says the author of Hebrews, "is the same yesterday, today, and forever" (13:8). And yet some of the most moving and memorable accounts of "the power of prayer" in the Bible seem to suggest that God does, at times, "change His mind" in response to the passionate and persistent pleas of the people He loves. In Genesis 18, for example, God is portrayed as sincerely open to the possibility of being dissuaded from destroying Sodom in response to Abraham's intercession on its behalf. Sodom is destroyed not because God is unwilling to consider "changing His mind," but because not even ten righteous persons could be found within its gates. In Exodus 32:7–10, after the golden calf incident, God clearly reveals to Moses His intention to destroy the nation of Israel. When Moses begs for mercy on Israel's behalf, however, "the Lord relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people" (Ex. 32:14).

The first part of Joel 2 describes in horrifying detail the destruction that God has planned for Judah on the great and awful "day of the Lord." But the last half of the chapter suggests that sincere pleas for forgiveness may bring about a change of God's heart: "Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him?" (Joel 2:14). The prophet Jonah actually becomes "disgusted" with God (see Jonah 4) because of His failure to make good on his threats of judgment against Nineveh. "When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it" (Jonah 3:10). Through the prophet Isaiah, God tells King Hezekiah: "You are going to die; you will not recover" (Is. 38:1). Hezekiah prays, and Isaiah returns with this message from God: "I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will heal you. . . I will add fifteen years to your life" (2 Kings 20:5–6). The prophet Jeremiah speaks repeatedly of Yahweh's willingness to "relent of the disaster that I intended" if only Israel will "return" to Him and "amend" its ways and deeds (Jer. 18:9–11; cf. Jer. 22:1–5). In the New Testament, James summarizes this biblical evidence with a strong assertion about the power of prayer, and adds his own Old Testament example:

The prayer of a righteous person has great power in its effects. Elijah was a man of like nature with ourselves, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth its fruit. (James 5:16–18, RSV)

In an intriguing and insightful article titled "Pastor, Does God Really Respond to My Prayers?" Reed Lessing reminds us that when the Bible speaks of God "changing His mind," it is making use of metaphorical language to

help us understand the true nature of God.⁷¹ Metaphors convey essential truths about God in the Bible, but “all metaphors have inherent in them continuity with the subject depicted, as well as discontinuity. Thus every metaphor speaks both of a ‘yes’ and a ‘no’—an ‘is’ and an ‘is not.’”⁷² The key is to recognize both the “yes” and the “no” of the metaphor in question.

These texts from Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, 1 Samuel, Jeremiah, Joel, and Jonah affirm two complementary aspects in the Old Testament portrait of Yahweh. First, the unchangeable nature of Yahweh assures us that we are not in the hands of an unstable force. His promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob form the backbone of the Biblical narrative. This is an “everlasting covenant” (Gen. 17:7). No one and nothing will separate Yahweh’s people from His love. This is the “no” of the metaphor. Yahweh’s faithfulness to His people and to His ultimate purposes knows no change. He is “God and not a man.”⁷³

On the other hand:

The “yes” of the metaphor indicates that we are not in the hands of an unfeeling ironclad deity. Yahweh is a person and as such enters into a real relationship with His creation in which His love compels Him to be responsive to people. Although He must punish those who do not believe, we may rest in the knowledge that we are in a relationship with a compassionate God who is ready and willing to change prior decisions in order to demonstrate His perfect love. This is particularly clear within texts where Yahweh’s change is rooted in His attributes of deep compassion. The “yes” is that Yahweh is a relational God.⁷⁴

Lessing points to Luther’s catechisms as evidence that “the Reformer rejects both extremes” in approaching the question of whether and/or how we can speak of prayer as having the potential to “change God’s mind.” Writing with deep pastoral concern, Luther “is careful not to raise doubts in the minds of those being catechized regarding the goodness of God and His revealed promises that he does hear and answer prayer.” Luther insists that “‘the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective’ (James 5:16) not because

⁷¹ Reed Lessing, “Pastor, Does God Really Respond to My Prayers?” (*Concordia Journal* 32:3 [July 2006]), 271. Note also Lessing’s excursus, “When Yahweh Changes a Prior Verdict,” in *Jonah* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2007), 324–341; and Walter A. Maier, Jr. in *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, vol. 68:2 (April 2004) titled “Does God ‘Repent’ or Change His Mind?” (127–144); and Paul R. Raabe, “When Yahweh Repents,” *Logia* 16 (2007), 31–34.

⁷² Lessing, 262.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 268.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

it is logically compatible with the doctrines of foreknowledge, predestination, and the like, but because this is what the Scriptures teach.” Key to Luther’s understanding of this apparent paradox, says Lessing, is “his understanding of *Deus absconditus* and *Deus revelatus*.”

Luther teaches that God’s foreknowledge is utterly certain and His will absolutely immutable. He places this understanding of God under the title *Deus absconditus*—the hidden God. From this perspective God is beyond dealing with; He is hidden in his majesty. But in grace and mercy this same God comes to us as *Deus revelatus*—the revealed God through Scripture and, climactically, through His Son Jesus.⁷⁵

For Luther—as for us!—this was no mere “theoretical” issue. Lessing refers to the occasion when Luther prayed fervently that his dear friend Philip Melanchthon’s life would be spared.⁷⁶ In this case, Melanchthon was healed. This moving personal story shows that Luther was himself fully convinced that God hears and answers the prayers of His people.

God does not, however, always answer affirmatively, for God’s immutable will is “good and gracious.”⁷⁷ He knows our need better than we, so He often does not give what we are longing and asking to receive. This does not mean He is unresponsive or that He does not hear our prayers. God is always responsive to His people’s prayer and *all of His responses flow from His love*. In a well-known biblical example, Paul prayed for God to relieve a condition that plagued him—“a thorn in my flesh”—and God answered, not with changing his condition, but with the gracious Word, “my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:7-10). In such a way God does His good and gracious will in answer to our prayers also.

Thus, we return to the kinds of questions pastors often hear: “Pastor, should I pray for my daughter to be healed, for this drought to end, and for my employer to increase my salary?” Lessing’s suggested answer is a good one:

Dear parishioner, our God loves us so much that we can confidently believe any number of Biblical promises and narratives that prompt us to ask the Father, for the sake of His Son Jesus, to reverse a prior decision (cf. 2 Cor. 12:7–10). And, who knows, perhaps for the sake of Jesus He may reverse a sickness, an infertile womb, a fractured relationship. But if not,

⁷⁵ Ibid., 270.

⁷⁶ Letter 290 to Mrs. Luther from Weimar, 2 July 1540, AE 50: 206–210 (WA Br 9.168); AE 4:266; cf. Lessing 272, fn. 51.

⁷⁷ “The good and gracious will of God is done even without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that it may be done among us also” (*Luther’s Small Catechism with Explanation* [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1991], 20).

we also pray, “Yet not my will, but Thy will be done” (Mark 14:36).⁷⁸

A final question

The preceding discussion helps us answer—so far as possible—the question of “how” the unchanging God responds to our prayers. But *why* does God desire communication with us? Why is He interested in hearing and receiving our prayers in the first place? God knows even before we pray what we (and others) need and why we (and they) need it. And God Himself needs nothing from us (see Psalm 50:12–15; Acts 17:25). He certainly does not “need” our prayers and worship, either for the “information” they provide or for the “affirmation” they offer. Why *is* God so interested in hearing our prayers?

In raising this question, we are broaching the question of the mystery of the Gospel itself, the inexplicable nature of God’s love and the mystery of His desire for intimacy with those whom he created and redeemed. Peter Brunner writes:

Before [the] fall, the foremost creature actually said with every breath: “Yes, Father.” He did not utter this yes of his love as a choice between yes and no, but in unquestioning, unbroken, spontaneous self-evidence, which knows of no choice and which is nevertheless—yes, by that very fact—the manifestation of the true, pristine freedom of man. Here already we are facing the miracle, which can be nothing but an offense to any outsider but comprises for the believer the blissful fullness of God’s love, namely, that man’s loving turning to God in prayer, praise and adoration is both in one: gift of love from above and personal mental act of a creaturely “I.”⁷⁹

When our prayer, “Thy kingdom come,” is finally and fully answered, we will again speak our “Yes” “to God in “unquestioning, unbroken, spontaneous” praise and thanksgiving: “‘For at that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call upon the name of the LORD and serve him with one accord’” (Zeph. 3:9).

Even in our fallenness, however, God continues actively to seek us out—as He sought out Adam and Eve and Cain after the Fall (Gen. 3–4)—toward the goal of delighting in our presence, fellowship, and praise.

The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing. (Zeph. 3:17)

⁷⁸ Ibid., 273.

⁷⁹ Peter Brunner, *Worship in the Name of Jesus* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), 37.

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable: "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." (Luke 15:1-7)

See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. (1 John 3:1)

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. (Rom. 8:35-37)

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? (Ps. 8:3-4)

Ultimately, therefore, our response to the gift and command of prayer (like our response to all of God's good and perfect gifts and commands) must be, with St. Paul, one of sheer doxology:

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" "Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?" For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen. (Rom. 11:33-36)

Chapter Three: How Do Christians Pray?

Jesus teaches us to pray

How do Christians pray? The answer depends on who is teaching us to pray. As noted above, genuinely *Christian* prayer can only flow from faith in Jesus *Christ* and the Triune God He reveals. Old Testament believers prayed in the Christ who was to come, revealed beforehand in the Torah, Prophets, and Psalms (Luke 24:44)—the very Psalms which tell of Christ (cf. Ps. 2:7; 110; Matt. 22:44, par.; Acts 2:34), taught Israel to pray, and still teach us today. The Incarnation of the Word means the only way to learn Christian prayer is from Christ, promised and revealed.

Jesus, God's Son in human flesh, not only reveals divinity in His person, He also shows us perfect *humanity*. God's Son, eternally one with the Father (John 10:30), is man and therein models a life of prayer not in some "other-worldly manner," but in authentic humanity. The eternal Word made flesh sets aside time for prayer (Luke 5:16), pleads with His Father in human weakness (Luke 22:42), and commends himself in death to the Father (Luke 23:46).

St. Augustine reminds us of the importance of the Incarnation for Christian prayer:

No greater gift could God have given to men than in making His Word, by which He created all things, their Head, and joining them to Him as His members: that the Son of God might become also the Son of man, one God with the Father, one Man with men; so that when we speak to God in prayer for mercy, we do not separate the Son from Him; and when the Body of the Son prays, it separates not its Head from itself: and it is one Saviour of His Body, our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who both prays for us, and prays in us, and is prayed to by us. *He prays for us, as our Priest; He prays in us, as our Head; He is prayed to by us, as our God.*⁸⁰

So Christians pray to the Father through the Son—and we pray *by* (or *in*) the Holy Spirit.⁸¹ Faith comes by the Holy Spirit's work. The Spirit's gift of faith is focused on Christ. In Christ we know the Father and are invited to pray to Him as His adopted children. So it is that by the Spirit we are enabled to "cry, 'Abba, Father'" (Rom. 8:15; cp. Gal. 4:6).

⁸⁰ St. Augustine, "Psalm LXXXVI," §1, in *Expositions on the Book of Psalms in A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff, [NPNF], vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1956), 409–410; emphasis added.

⁸¹ "Wherever the Holy Spirit makes his entry into human life, there we find the origin of Christian prayer, since it is the Spirit who moves us to pray and who instructs us in the life of prayer. . . . It is the Holy Spirit who unites us with the living Christ and thereby enables us to enter into a living communion with him. It is the Spirit who prays for us and with us (Rom. 8:15, 16). He teaches us how to pray, for we do not know how to pray as we ought (Rom. 8:26)." Donald G. Bloesch, *The Struggle for Prayer* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), 37.

The Spirit's teaching is not by way of merely subjective feelings. We pray as taught by the Holy Spirit in the sacred Scriptures that show us Christ who makes the Father known. Our High Priest, Jesus, teaches us in His words and by His example.

Learning prayer from Christ means, as Luther points out, that the "how" of Christian prayer goes in two directions: "our Lord Christ himself has taught us *both the way and the words*" of prayer.⁸² The way or manner of Christian prayer flows from faith itself. We pray because God has made Himself known to us and worked faith in us. The words and content of Christian prayer flow from the fact that the one in whom we believe leads us to learn words by first repeating His words, as in the Lord's Prayer and psalms. Dietrich Bonhoeffer emphasizes this connection:

In response to the request of the disciples, Jesus gave them the Lord's Prayer. Every prayer is contained in it. Whatever is included in the petitions of the Lord's Prayer is prayed aright; whatever is not included is no prayer. All the prayers of Holy Scripture are summarized in the Lord's Prayer, and they are contained in its immeasurable breadth. They are not made superfluous by the Lord's Prayer but constitute the inexhaustible richness of the Lord's Prayer as the Lord's Prayer is their summation. Luther says of the Psalter: "It penetrates the Lord's Prayer and the Lord's Prayer penetrates it, so that it is possible to understand one on the basis of the other and to bring them into joyful harmony." Thus the Lord's Prayer becomes the touchstone for whether we pray in the name of Jesus Christ or our own name. It makes good sense, then, that the Psalter is often bound together in a single volume with the New Testament. It is the prayer of the Christian church. It belongs to the Lord's Prayer.⁸³

It is by means of the words that God Himself has spoken to us, therefore, that we Christians learn to speak back to him in prayer.

The child learns to speak because his father speaks to Him. He learns the speech of his father. So we learn to speak to God because God has spoken to us and speaks to us. By means of the speech of the Father in heaven his children learn to speak with him. Repeating God's own words after him, we begin to pray to him. We ought to speak to God and he wants to hear us, not in the false and confused speech of our heart, but in the

⁸² LC, 3, KW, 441.

⁸³ Bonhoeffer, *Psalms*, 15–16.

clear and pure speech which God has spoken to us in Jesus Christ.⁸⁴

"This is pure grace," says Bonhoeffer, "that God tells us how we can speak with him."⁸⁵

*The way or manner of Christian prayer*⁸⁶

We pray as children of God, "for that is what we are" (1 John 3:1). Consider a child of two or three years, in new command of the gift of speech, and watch how she uses that gift with her mother and father. She relishes this ability, talking sometimes incessantly, never afraid to ask for what she needs or wants. She is confident, though she is also learning that not everything she asks is given. Her courage is in the loving care she receives from father and mother. So she speaks. She asks. She expects (Ps. 4:3).

That is a picture of Christian prayer. If "prayer is nothing else than the lifting up of heart or mind to God," then that is portrayed by believers who, like little children, run to their Father in heaven—lifting up their arms to Him (both figuratively and sometimes literally) for Him to "pick them up" and take them into His secure presence.⁸⁷ This is the very picture of prayer our Lord gives us when He teaches us to "Pray then like this: 'Our Father in heaven'" (Matt. 6:9). Luther explains: "with these words God tenderly invites us to believe that He is our true Father and that we are His true children, so that with all boldness and confidence we may ask Him as dear children ask their dear Father."⁸⁸

The plea of the little child is not dependent on an ability to articulate. Parents respond to their child's need, not to its careful articulation. So also God's children are not hindered by a failure to understand fully what it is that they need or want to say to God. Our Father does not scorn even impolite, incoherent, halting, or hysterical prayers. His Word is filled with them: "Give ear to my words, O Lord, consider my groaning" (Ps. 5:1). "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" (Ps. 13:1). God does not turn away from such prayers. "O LORD, you hear the desire of the afflicted" (Ps. 10:17a; cp. Ps. 38:9). Augustine reminds us that God hears even our longing. "It does not always find its way to the ears of man; but it

⁸⁴ Ibid., 11.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 15.

⁸⁶ Luther also refers to the "mood" of Christian prayer. He speaks of the Holy Spirit's work in the Psalms in this way: "by this book He prepares both the language and the mood in which we should address the Heavenly Father and pray for that which the other books have taught us to do and to imitate." AE 14:286.

⁸⁷ AE 42:25; p. 6 above. The liturgy of communion begins with the bidding, "Lift up your hearts," and the response, "We lift them up to the Lord." In many traditions, pastor and people lift their hands to the Lord as they pray.

⁸⁸ *Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation*, 19.

never ceases to sound in the ears of God.”⁸⁹ The Holy Spirit turns even the inarticulate sighs of God’s people into prayers (Rom. 8:26).⁹⁰

Children not only weep and plead, they also confidently laugh, play, and sing. So the prayers of God’s children are often joyful song and not only mournful pleading. Praise marks their gatherings.⁹¹ “I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing and make melody to the LORD” (Ps. 27:6b).⁹² Such joyful confidence is not misplaced. It, too, is grounded in the word “Father” that Jesus puts on our lips, for “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 1:3) is now our own “God and Father” (Gal. 1:4). The risen Lord Jesus, whose cross was atonement for the sins of the world, says to Mary and to all who believe in His name that His God is *our God* and His Father is *our Father* (John 20:17). We are baptized and therefore “sons of God through faith” (Gal. 3:26–27).⁹³ Justified by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, we are boldly and confidently permitted and even commanded to call the almighty, immutable, omniscient, eternal, ubiquitous holy God our dear and tender Father. If the Son sets you free to call God “Father,” then do so confidently (Heb. 4:16; 1 John 3:21, also John 8:36)!

Our confidence only increases—for Jesus, the Son of God, assures us that “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you” (John 15:16). From this comes the commendable custom of ending prayers “in Jesus’ name,” with its reminder that we can be as certain that God hears our prayers as if we were Jesus Himself. Yet there is more to prayer in the name of Jesus than the use of a customary phrase. We earlier considered some misunderstandings of prayer in Jesus’ name. What, then, does it mean? It is, simply, prayer spoken from faith in Jesus our Lord. Hallesby suggests that “to pray in the name of Jesus is the real element of prayer in our prayers. It is the helpless soul’s helpless look

⁸⁹ Augustine, “Psalm XXXVIII, 13,” *NPNE*, 107. Augustine also notes how this reality should affect our longing and desires so that we are seeking what God wants for us. See also Matt. 6:33.

⁹⁰ “There are times when we cannot pray in words, or pray as we ought; but our inarticulate longings for a better life are the Spirit’s intercessions on our behalf, audible to God who searches all hearts, and intelligible and acceptable to Him since they are the voice of His Spirit, and it is according to His will that the Spirit should intercede for the members of His Son.” From Henry B. Swete, *The Holy Spirit in the New Testament* (London: Macmillan, 1909), 221.

⁹¹ Luther counts prayer and praise to be one of seven “marks” that identify the church. “Where you see and hear the Lord’s Prayer prayed and taught; or psalms or other spiritual songs sung, in accordance with the word of God and true faith. . . you may rest assured that a holy Christian people of God are present.” *AE* 41:164.

⁹² On the “playful” element of Christian worship, see Romano Guardini, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997), 61–72.

⁹³ An emphasis on Baptism as the foundation for our confidence to call God “Father” is present in the earliest Christian reflection on the Lord’s Prayer. See Robert L. Simpson, *The Interpretation of Prayer in the Early Church* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1965), 57.

unto a gracious Friend.”⁹⁴ Commenting on John 15:16, Luther emphasizes the connection between being chosen in Christ and the promise that the Father will hear:

This [promise] also belongs; yes, it is the power and the result of His election. For through this grace in Christ we not only become God’s friends through Him and acquire God as our Father; but our election also enables us to ask Him for whatever we need and to be assured that it will be given to us. For since we continually encounter trials, opposition, and obstacles, both from the devil and the world and also from our own flesh; since much weakness and frailty still inheres both in us and in others; since everything is imperfect—for all these reasons it is necessary for us to plead for strength, help, and salvation in every distressing situation.⁹⁵

God’s encouragement in prayer is coupled with His assurances that He knows our desperate condition, our “weakness and frailty.” Though terrorized by Saul, David could nevertheless be certain of a refuge: “Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me, for in you my soul takes refuge; in the shadow of your wings I will take refuge, till the storms of destruction pass by” (Ps. 57:1). Not even sin can diminish the confident prayers of God’s children—our access to God is based on His grace for us in Christ, not on our conduct (Rom. 5:2). Even while “feeble and crushed” by God’s judgment against his sins, David could still confidently declare, “O Lord, all my longing is before you; my sighing is not hidden from you” (Ps. 38:8–9). So Jesus assures us: “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows” (Matt. 10:28–31).

Rather than be inhibited by our sins, by the austere majesty of the almighty God, or by life’s defeats, Jesus “tenderly invites us” to come to God, our Father, with confidence and zeal. Christ’s purifying work in our lives results in zeal for good works (Titus 2:14), among which none is more important than prayer.

Yet, zeal for prayer—a sense of eagerness, discipline, and urgency about it—is often lacking in believers. A traditional collect begins with the truthful admission that God is “always more ready to hear than we to pray.”⁹⁶ We struggle to pray. Weariness, busy-ness, doubts, temptations, the why-bother-

⁹⁴ Ole Hallesby, *Prayer* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1994), 59.

⁹⁵ AE 24:263; emphasis added.

⁹⁶ The collect for the 11th Sunday after Trinity. See Commission on Worship of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *Lutheran Service Book: Propers of the Day* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2007), 368; also Series C, Proper 25, 281. A collect is a brief prayer which addresses a theme from the Scripture readings for a particular Sunday or festival.

when-God-already-knows attitude discussed above⁹⁷—such things and much more dampen any priority for talking to God. We become lackadaisical, failing to set aside time or to plan and prepare ourselves for prayer. Instead, we pray when it occurs to us or feel like we need it. We pray half-heartedly and semi-consciously, like the disciples who snoozed while Jesus prayed earnestly in great agony (Luke 22:39–46).

We also continually face the doubts of our sinful humanity. Does prayer really matter? Is God there? Are my pathetic needs important to an eternal God? Prayer becomes foolish to the skeptical. It seems contrary to our natural pragmatism which constantly says, “Do something!” and sees prayer as just another form of dithering. Our hearts easily grow cold.

Because such forces constantly distract our prayers, we can only pray in our Lord Jesus. Only He—by His power, His love, His truth, His Word—can break through our doubting, dispirited hearts again and again. “Lord, teach us to pray,” is not a one-time request, it is the constant petition of Christ’s sinner-saints. Only He can spark our faith to realize anew the great treasure that we have in the invitation from the Lord of heaven and earth to come and talk to Him. The manner and way of prayer that we learn from Christ is zealous to the core—it is passionate, eager to call on God, urgent and constant in petition, for it is such prayers that Christ Himself offers and encourages. Jesus shows that prayer makes fasting and sleepless nights worthwhile (Matt. 4:2; Luke 6:12; Acts 14:23). Prayer is worthy of disciplined perseverance, like that of the persistent widow in one of Jesus’ stories (Luke 18:1–8), because He assures us that His Father is never deaf to us, even if His answers seem long in coming. The zeal of Christ produces zealous Christian prayer. Only His constancy, not ours, can aid us in our struggle to pray. He continually invites, “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you (Matt. 7:7). As we alternate between the struggle to pray and earnest striving in prayer (see Rom. 15:30–31; Col. 4:12–13), Jesus has given His Spirit to sustain us (Rom. 8:26).

Another thing is clear about the way or manner of Christian prayer. We do not pray alone. We pray as members of the Body of Christ, and so, first, with Christ our Head. He told us to pray with Him—“*Our Father*”—so we pray in plural, but not simply because there are other Christians. We pray first with Him, who enabled our adoption as sons and daughters who say, “*Abba, Father*” (Gal. 4:4–7; cp. Rom. 8:15, 23; Eph. 1:3–6). Then, in and with Christ, we pray as part of the entire family of faith, His body—the one, holy, catholic,⁹⁸ and apostolic church. The life of prayer given to *each* who believes

⁹⁷ See above, pp. 27ff.

⁹⁸ “Catholic,” the original term used in the Nicene Creed, should not be scorned. The root of the term is the Greek word for “whole” or wholeness. It is not a reference to the Roman Catholic Church, but to the church’s universality and completeness—that the church of Christ exists across human, geographic, and temporal boundaries.

in Christ, is given to *all* who believe in Him, so the concern of such Christian prayer is never for self alone. None who prays in Christ can pray without concern for the whole Body of Christ (Luke 9:28; Matt. 19:13; Col. 4:2-3; 1 Thess. 5:25; James 5:16; Acts 12:5).

While Jesus invites us into an intensely personal manner of prayer, He never encourages a self-absorbed preoccupation with “my desires”—something so evident in sinful humanity.⁹⁹ It is therefore inherent to baptismal life that Christians not only pray alone, but also gather with other believers at set times and places for prayer. In corporate settings, the prayers may be somewhat different in that one person speaks for many, emphasizing the concerns of the assembly and the church as a whole more than private or individual worries. Yet, the essential manner of such prayers will not differ from the most private prayers of individuals, for the church’s corporate prayers also address our Father in heaven with earnest confidence as those who come to Him in Jesus’ name.

The words or content of Christian prayer

To pray is to speak to God, so it becomes important to ask about the actual words we might use. We might answer, “It doesn’t matter! Say anything you want.” And, certainly, we are not restricted in what God allows us to say to Him. Consequently, daily life often “sets the agenda” for our prayers. One who is suffering cries out to God for relief—little else can even enter his mind. The terrified person can pray for nothing but rescue. The Christian alienated from his or her spouse or loved ones can think and pray about nothing else. Such prayers, although exclusively personal and concerned only with the very moment, are godly, Christian prayers. Our Lord’s prayers in the garden were such (Luke 22:41–45), and the Word of God never discourages such prayers: “Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.” (Ps. 50:15; cp. Ps. 86:7). Such prayers come almost “automatically” for we know we have a gracious God who has revealed His love in Christ Jesus, His Son. Given His Holy Spirit in Baptism, we are freed for such prayers, knowing that nothing that concerns His children is trivial to our Father, who is always ready to listen.

Yet, if all we think and pray about is personal and individualistic—“what occurs to me and what I desire”—our prayers are impoverished. Jesus does not leave us without guidance for a richer life of prayer. He leads us away from empty selfishness in our prayers. Nowhere is this more evident than in the petitions of the Lord’s Prayer (Matt. 6:7–15; Luke 11:1–13). He gives us *specific words to pray*. Even as He assures us that we can boldly pray about all

⁹⁹ Timothy J. Wengert notes that Martin Luther’s focus on the Lord’s Prayer kept him from such solipsism; “Luther on Prayer in the Large Catechism” in *The Pastoral Luther: Essays on Martin Luther’s Practical Theology*, Timothy J. Wengert, ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 181.

our concerns, He also shows us vital things for which to ask Him in prayer and does not leave us to try to discover our Father's prayer priorities.

It is also important to know from the example of Christ that He also prayed the psalms and knew them from memory (e.g., Matt. 27:46 [Ps. 22]; Luke 23:46 [Ps. 31]; Matt. 21:16 [Ps. 8:2]; Matt. 22:44 [Ps. 110]; John 10 [Ps. 23, Ps. 95]). The "hymn" that Jesus and his disciples sang at the conclusion of the Passover before going to the Mount of Olives (Matt. 26:30) was quite likely Psalms 115–118.¹⁰⁰ Therefore from its beginning, the church followed this pattern of praying the psalms (e.g., Acts 4:23–31 where the church prays Psalm 2). Paul describes the worship life of the early church as involving "singing psalms" (Col. 3:16) for in the Psalter we also have divine content for our prayers.¹⁰¹

What a gift! Little children cannot mature if they speak only about their own concerns. Interactions with adults gradually stretch and expand their hearts and minds. The same is true for the children of God. "By means of the Father in heaven his children learn to speak with him. Repeating God's own words after him, we begin to pray to him."¹⁰² We grow and mature as we begin to think *and pray* about God's purposes and not only our own. For this reason, throughout the history of God's people believers have not only prayed in their own words, but also in the words of others. They have prayed in the words of the Psalms and canticles of Scripture and the hymns of other composers.¹⁰³ They have prayed in the words of written prayers from service books and other resources. They have prayed with pastors who speak in and for an assembly of believers, even when the only word the assembly speaks is "Amen." Such praying is every bit as important as the personal prayers we speak privately to God, for in this way our hearts are open to the whole of God's people and their needs and to the concerns that God Himself places into our prayers.

¹⁰⁰ The "Great Hallel," which includes: "The LORD is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation. Glad songs of salvation are in the tents of the righteous: 'The right hand of the LORD does valiantly; the right hand of the LORD exalts, the right hand of the LORD does valiantly.' I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the LORD. The LORD has disciplined me severely, but he has not given me over to death," Ps. 118:14–18). See Michael Green, *The Message of Matthew* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000, 277; W.F. Albright and C.S. Mann, *Matthew: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1971), 326.

¹⁰¹ "Properly to pray the psalms is to pray them in Jesus' name, because the voice in the Psalter is Christ's own voice. Christ is the referential center of the Book of Psalms." Patrick Henry Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms* (Ben Lomond, CA: Conciliar Press, 2000), xvii. Reardon's book is a helpful tool, designed to aid in a prayerful use of the psalter which recognizes Christ's presence there (Luke 24:44).

¹⁰² Bonhoeffer, *Psalms*, 11.

¹⁰³ Note the example of Ezra, who prays by means of the Psalms in 9:6 (Ps. 38:4), 9:7 (Ps. 106:6), and 9:8 (Ps. 13:3).

Christians in every era have prayed the Lord's Prayer in the simple faith that, since Jesus gave it to teach us how to pray, we should use it.¹⁰⁴ No prayer is better known, but its value is lost when we simply rattle it off thoughtlessly. Luther recommends not only that we speak the prayer word for word, but also that, in our daily prayers, we dwell on the prayer one petition at a time, praying about the area of Christian faith and life on which that petition focuses.¹⁰⁵ The following pages therefore provide a meditative look at how our prayers may be shaped by the priorities of the Lord's Prayer.¹⁰⁶

The First Petition: "Hallowed be thy name"

The first three petitions of the *Our Father* are inseparable, bound together by the final clause of the third petition, "on earth as it is in heaven."¹⁰⁷ Luther's explanations of these petitions strike a repetitive note, emphasizing our need for something God has promised. God's name is holy, His kingdom comes, His will is done—all regardless of our praying—yet, we pray that all of this would be true *among us*. We pray precisely because "on earth," unlike "in heaven," God's name is regularly profaned, His kingdom faces constant rebellion, and His will is denied in favor of the sinfully bound will of humanity.

To pray these petitions is to beg God to be *our God*. God "desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4), yet we cannot save ourselves or reason our way to such truth. To pray as Christ teaches is to know that nothing else is important, so we plead for God to stop at nothing to make us His own. John Donne captured this desperate need in stark verses, begging God to "batter my heart," to overthrow the human will, which is "betrothed" to Satan, and imprison him, for only one who is captive to Christ is free.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ "As He [Christ] has said, *whatsoever we shall ask of the Father in His Name, He will give us*, how much more effectually do we obtain what we ask in Christ's Name, if we ask for it in His own words?" Cyprian, *The Lord's Prayer*, §1 in *The Treatises of S. Caecilius Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, and Martyr* (Oxford: James Parker and Co. and Rivingtons, 1876), 178.

¹⁰⁵ AE 42:194–195.

¹⁰⁶ These remarks on the seven petitions offer nothing new or profound. They neither can replace nor should they distract confessional Lutherans in particular from the far more important comments of Luther (in the *Large Catechism* especially), to say nothing of countless other commentators (e.g., Cyprian, whom Luther references).

¹⁰⁷ On the structural and theological connections of the first three petitions and the prevalence of this understanding, see Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Matthew 1:1–11:1* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 325–326.

¹⁰⁸ BATTER my heart, three person'd God; for, you
As yet but knocke, breathe, shine, and seeke to mend;
That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow mee, and bend
Your force, to breake, blowe, burn and make me new.
I, like an usurpt towne, to another due,
Labour to admit you, but Oh, to no end,
Reason your viceroy in mee, mee should defend,
But is captiv'd, and proves weake or untrue.
Yet dearly I love you, and would be loved faine,

Regarding the first petition, Luther says, “In this petition God becomes everything and man becomes nothing.”¹⁰⁹ “Hallowed be thy name” echoes throughout Scripture. The Old Testament’s ceaseless praise of “the LORD” (Yahweh) hallows His name (e.g., Ps. 30:4; 97:12; 105:3; 106:47). In the ancient world, where a pantheon of gods by various names were given worship, sacrifice, and prayers, one true God made Himself personally known, revealing His name and His identity. The God who created heaven and earth “introduced” Himself personally to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as “Yahweh.”¹¹⁰ He showed Himself in many ways—so that His name would mean something real and wonderful. Those who heard in faith came to know that “the LORD,” Yahweh, was the one true God of power and might, mercy and grace.

The Old Testament also reveals that the Lord’s holy name is profaned, not only by the Gentiles, but also by Israel. He warns anyone who would profane His name: “I will set my face against that man. . .” (Lev. 20:3). Israel profaned Him by joining in the worship and sacrifices of pagans (Lev. 18:21), swearing dishonestly in His name (Lev. 19:12), and violating His commands (Lev. 22:31–32). Even those who brought sacrifices to “the LORD” were guilty of profaning His name if they did not also listen to His words (Ezek. 20:39).

The One who said, “I am who I am” (Ex. 3:14), has revealed His identity in Holy Scripture and, pre-eminently, in the person and work of Christ (Heb. 1:1-2). Our Lord both defines and hallows God’s name and reveals what it means for our lives to hallow the divine Name.¹¹¹ How little we reflect these virtues and this name! The triune God’s name, given to us in Baptism, is instead demeaned daily, so God must hallow His name ever anew. Only then will we be enabled again to use it rightly in prayer and praise.¹¹²

But am betroth’d unto your enemy:
Divorce mee, untie, or breake that knot againe;
Take mee to you, imprison mee, for I
Except you’enthral mee, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish mee.

“Batter My Heart, Three-Personed God,” in Grierson, Herbert J.C., ed. *Metaphysical Lyrics & Poems of the 17th c.* (Oxford, The Clarendon Press, 1947), 88.

¹⁰⁹ AE 42:27.

¹¹⁰ Most English translations render the personal name of God, יהוה (Yahweh), as “the LORD,” using small caps to distinguish it. See Gen 12:1-7; Gen 26:24; Gen 28:13 where the LORD reveals Himself in turn by name and by deed to the patriarchs. See also Gibbs, 327.

¹¹¹ Luther reminds us that our Lord’s virtues are aspects or “names” of the holy God. “Since we are baptized into these names and are consecrated and hallowed by them, and since they have thus become our names, it follows that God’s children should be called and also be gentle, merciful, chaste, just, truthful, guileless, friendly, peaceful, and kindly disposed toward all, even toward our enemies.” AE 42:28.

¹¹² Note the meaning of the second commandment in Luther’s *Small Catechism*.

How is this prayer answered? Psalm 29 commands the angels¹¹³ to “ascribe to the LORD the glory due His name”—that is, to worship Him or “to praise His glorious name.”¹¹⁴ On earth (unlike heaven) our only hope for the name to be hallowed is, as Gibbs notes, God’s determination to sanctify His own name: “I will hallow my great name, which has been profaned. . . .” (Ezek. 36:23).¹¹⁵ He does this through His Word. We therefore ask that His sanctifying Word be proclaimed purely, “on earth.” We pray for preachers, teachers, missionaries, and all who tell of Christ. We pray for a faithful, daily witness in the lives of God’s people so that a renewed humanity may hallow the divine name.

To hallow the name is also to use His name rightly in prayer and worship. In obedience to the second command we are not to “misuse the name of the Lord your God”—but to call on Him in prayer and thanksgiving.¹¹⁶ Throughout the Psalter the Holy Spirit guides the prayers of God’s people in hallowing the divine name. Prayer and praise are twin elements of “hallowing the Name,” so that many psalms—Psalm 18 for example—move back and forth between speaking *to* God (prayer) and speaking *about* God (praise).¹¹⁷

Above all else, then, God’s name is hallowed when Jesus is confessed as Lord and His grace is proclaimed. To know God’s name is to know the Gospel, centered in God’s very identity—who He really is, what He has done.¹¹⁸ So Basil rightly says “that when we remember His mighty works, we find the proper means of praise.”¹¹⁹

¹¹³ The Hebrew is difficult here, but most recent translations take this to be a reference to the angels or heavenly beings, while earlier commentators (e.g., Augustine or Basil), using either the LXX or Vulgate which parallel “sons of God” with “sons of rams,” took the first verse as a command to the church. See Craig A. Blaising and Carmen S. Hardin, eds., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Psalms 1–50*, vol. 7 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 214–215.

¹¹⁴ Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms*, vol. 1, in *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1949), 368.

¹¹⁵ Gibbs, 327, author’s translation.

¹¹⁶ Luther notes that this is the opposite of the sin forbidden by the second commandment: LC 3, 5–6, KW, 441 and LC 3, 45, KW, 446. See also Wengert, 185.

¹¹⁷ Psalm 34 is a paradigm for this sanctifying of God’s Name. Sixteen times David repeats the name of “the LORD.” As Paul boasted in the Lord about his own weakness (2 Cor 10:17; 11:30; 12:9; cp. Rom 3:27; Gal 6:14), David’s soul also boasts in the Lord (Ps 34:2), exalting the name of the Lord who saved the poor and troubled, the fearful and hungry, the broken-hearted and crushed in spirit. “The LORD,” therefore, is the name of the true God who “redeems his servants” who take “refuge in him” (v. 22).

¹¹⁸ Note Tertullian (cited in Simpson, 44) who says the Lord’s Prayer is “an epitome of the gospel.” Cp. above p. 8.

¹¹⁹ *On the Holy Spirit*, 8.17 (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1980), 35. Basil goes on to reflect on how the many names or titles given to God in Scripture illumine His majesty and nature.

The Second Petition: “Thy kingdom come”

It is true to say that “The Lord’s Prayer is the gospel turned into prayer.”¹²⁰ The Lord’s Prayer begins with the Gospel—even the Gospel in the sense of justification by grace through faith—in that our Lord’s first teaching on prayer is that we can do nothing unless God is *our God* by hallowing His name in the Word made flesh. By such revelation He draws us into His kingdom by His Spirit through faith. So the first petition leads directly to the second where “We pray for the coming of that kingdom, which has been promised to us by God, and was gained by the Blood and passion of Christ.”¹²¹ Luther notes that the second petition is that God’s kingdom “may come to us also” by the Holy Spirit’s work of instilling faith in “His holy Word” and godly obedience to our King.¹²²

God makes Himself known in order to rule us—to be our Lord and King. “Rule” may sound oppressive and harsh to our ears, but it is nothing less than a gracious, saving work. Only in God’s rule and kingdom can we be truly free. During World War II Helmut Thielicke preached on the second petition in the ruins of a recently-bombed church:

In these fearful, fateful weeks many people appear to have become alienated from their faith in God; they begin to ask how he can “permit” such things to happen. It would be better, however, if they were alienated from their faith in *men*.¹²³

The rule of sinful men (under the evil one) continually challenges the rule of God.¹²⁴ The sinner in us rebels against God, preferring another lord or ruler (Is. 26:13). We fail to see the oppressive results when we substitute an alien power/authority for the triune God. Political, economic, and social movements lead us to seek yet another kingdom/authority and its “righteousness.” How content should we be with such human kingdoms over the past century? Even more, how content *could* we be when we realize that the ultimate alternative to the kingdom of God is not mere earthly rule and authority, but the rule of Satan?¹²⁵

Our Lord invites us to echo His wise petition: “*Thy kingdom come.*” God’s rule will not, for now, simply replace any earthly kingdom. God gives Caesar his say (Matt. 22:21). But only God’s rule will protect us from the

¹²⁰ Simon Chan, *Liturgical Theology: The Church as Worshiping Community* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 114.

¹²¹ Cyprian, *The Lord’s Prayer*, §8, 183.

¹²² *Luther’s Small Catechism with Explanation*, 183–184.

¹²³ *Our Heavenly Father: Sermons on the Lord’s Prayer* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 58.

¹²⁴ This does not deny that, as the doctrine of “two kingdoms” teaches, God also rules *through* sinful men in earthly institutions like government (Rom 13:3–4), maintaining some level of order despite the chaos of sin and Satan.

¹²⁵ Cf. AE 42:38.

deceits of earthly rule (Rom. 8:38–39). God’s kingdom is never far because of Christ’s presence among those with faith in Him (Luke 10:9, 11; 17:21; 21:31; Col. 1:13–14), even as it will come in all its visible power in the day of Christ’s return (Mark 9:1; cp. 1 Cor. 15:24). His kingdom means safety in His presence and promises. His kingdom and rule are above all other rulers and authorities (1 Tim. 6:15, cf. Dan. 2:37). No wonder our Lord teaches us to plead for our place under Him.

Yet, in a sinful, rebellious world, God’s rule often seems alien and repressive. To “seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness” (Matt. 6:33) is no onerous bid for dictatorial oppression. In Christ we know the goodness of the Kingdom. In Him, despite the dangerous rulers and authorities of the present age, we know the salutary goodness of this “pearl,” this “treasure,” this “seed”¹²⁶ (cf. Matt. 13:44–46; Matt. 13:31; Mark 4:26–29) for which we long and pray.¹²⁷

The second petition teaches us to pray that Christ’s kingdom would grow and expand, like a widening net (Matt. 13:47–48). We pray for open hearts and doors to the Gospel (Col. 4:2–4) and for its rapid spread (2 Thess. 3:1). This disallows a narrow view of the kingdom coming to a favored few of “us.” We pray for the “us” of the whole (catholic) people of God, to all whom the Lord our God will call (Acts 2:39). “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore *pray earnestly* to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest” (Luke 10:2, emphasis added). “This Second Petition is therefore our missionary prayer.”¹²⁸ With this petition “we desire that the whole world, which so evidently lies in evil and longing, in fear and in striving, would see and receive this light, which entered the world some two thousand years ago, when on the outskirts of the Roman empire was heard that lonely, yet still resounding voice: “‘Repent . . . for the kingdom of God is at hand’ (Matt. 3:2).”¹²⁹

The second petition, like the first, sounds a clear note of Gospel—pure, undeserved grace. “To emphasize more the free gift of God, we do not say that we come to the kingdom of God, but rather pray that it may come to us.”¹³⁰ The very content of the kingdom is the Gospel. Luther: “What is the kingdom

¹²⁶ See Guardino, 38: “. . . we soon notice that the ‘kingdom of God’ cannot be reduced to a single concept. It is something mighty, pervasive, penetrating, operative, multiform.”

¹²⁷ The OT is rich with this emphasis: “Thy kingdom come” echoes songs like Psalm 2, where we learn to pray for the rule of the Lord and His Anointed. To pray this is also to pray *against* the raging nations and their kings (vv 1–4, 8). We seek Zion’s King in the Son the Lord has begotten (v 7), “kissing the Son” in familiar homage rather than setting ourselves against Him (v 12).

¹²⁸ Theodore Graebner, *The Lord’s Prayer and the Christian Life* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1937), 17.

¹²⁹ Alexander Schmemmann, *Our Father* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002), 40–41.

¹³⁰ Martin Chemnitz, *The Lord’s Prayer* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 48.

of God? Answer: Simply what we heard above in the Creed, namely, that God sent his Son, Christ our LORD, into the world to redeem and deliver us . . . ”¹³¹

This prayer is granted only as gift: “To this end he also gave his Holy Spirit to deliver this to us through his holy Word and to enlighten and strengthen us in faith by his power.”¹³² Since “The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy *in the Holy Spirit*” (Rom. 14:17), Luther rightly emphasized that the second petition teaches us to pray for the Holy Spirit. By the Spirit Christ cast out demons and brought those He now possessed into His kingdom (Matt. 12:28). In the *Holy Spirit* and not in the ruling human spirit the kingdom is given, and apart from the Spirit’s washing none can enter the kingdom (John 3:5; cf. 1 Cor. 6:9–11; Titus 3:5). This is, of course, because only the Spirit can work faith in a humanity ruled by sin and death: “. . . no one can say that Jesus is Lord [or King], but by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:3). By the Holy Spirit sinners become sinner-saints who seek to be obedient subjects of the kingdom, loving the rule of Christ and seeking to honor Him with their lives.

The Third Petition: “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”

The third petition is challenging in two ways. First, there is a textual matter. Jesus teaches the “Lord’s Prayer” in both Matthew 6:9–13 and Luke 11:1–4, but in the briefer version of Luke 11, there is no “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” This led Luther to explain “Thy will be done” as a summary of the first two petitions in his reply to the question, “How is God’s will done?” He explains that God’s will is for “us to hallow God’s name” and “let His kingdom come.”¹³³ *The Large Catechism* also explains that the third petition shows our need “to keep firm hold on these two things,” namely, the holiness of God’s name and the need for His kingly rule.¹³⁴ This simple insight helps us to recognize that the third petition is not primarily about what God causes or permits to happen. Rather, Christ leads us to pray for God’s saving work of redemption and sanctification to continue in us.

Second, Luther’s answer to the *first* catechism question on the third petition, “What does this mean?” helps us see an even greater challenge in this petition—the meaning of “the will of God.”¹³⁵ That challenge is deepened by the final clause, “on earth as it is in heaven.” If God is almighty, isn’t His will an automatic? Cyprian had earlier asked: “For who resists God, so that

¹³¹ LC 3:51, KW, 446.

¹³² Ibid. Cf. also Bloesch: “We can approach the throne of God only on the basis of the righteousness of Christ communicated to us by the Holy Spirit” (56).

¹³³ *Luther’s Small Catechism with Explanation*, 186.

¹³⁴ LC 3:61, KW, 448.

¹³⁵ Often referred to as God’s “causative” or “permissive” will. Chemnitz has a helpful discussion of various ways to think of God’s will in *The Lord’s Prayer*, 51–55.

He cannot do His own will?"¹³⁶ Many ask this very question, look at history's horrors and at natural disasters, and then conclude that such events prove that both the idea of God's will and God's very existence are simply untenable.

That Jesus teaches us to pray for God's will to be done helps us to think more deeply. Here as in the previous two petitions, he reminds us of the great gulf between earth and heaven. Unlike heaven, where nothing hinders God's bright and gracious will, on earth we pray "before the dark backdrop of a world in which, notoriously, this will is not done."¹³⁷ David Crump reminds us that "Prayer is the language of eschatology." We live "between the times," that is, "while Christian prayer occurs in this life, its priorities and values are dictated by the next."¹³⁸

The paradox of prayer itself is highlighted in this petition. Prayer always seeks changes. "God's will" is too deep for us to fathom. "I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity, I am the LORD, who does all these things" (Is. 45:7). An earthquake *is* in some fashion God's will, yet we pray that no one will die from it. Prayer "involves not only submission to the will of God but seeking to change his will."¹³⁹ Like Jacob, we are "striving with God" (cf. Gen. 32:28) to seek His blessing, but not in some attempt to manipulate or coerce God to do what we want, because we know that we are better off in God's hands than ours. This is so because faith sees that in Christ God *will*s our salvation (1 Tim. 2:4), no matter how much other aspects of His will befuddle us. There is indeed much that is mysterious about God's will, but what is completely unambiguous is his desire to bring life and salvation through faith in Jesus Christ (Ez. 18:23; 1 Tim. 2:4; John 6:39–40). For this we pray.

This petition also forces us to acknowledge the paradox that the almighty God does not "get His way" in all things even though His good and gracious will is accomplished in the end. The third petition recognizes forces that are contrary to the intention and will of God. Jesus teaches us to strive earnestly in prayer against all that makes earth inferior to heaven. The Scriptures show us the real problem against which we struggle: the evil one exerts a will of his own and our own fallen will is a party to his rebellion.

Luther is graphic: the "furious foe" rampages upon the earth; he "raves and rages with all his power and might, marshaling all his subjects and even enlisting the world and our own flesh as his allies."¹⁴⁰ War rages and evil's power must be broken. Yet, Luther also cautions us, lest our striving against

¹³⁶ Cyprian, *The Lord's Prayer*, §9, 184.

¹³⁷ Thieliicke, 69.

¹³⁸ David Crump, *Knocking on Heaven's Door: A New Testament Theology of Petitionary Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 299.

¹³⁹ Bloesch, 72. Note also the section above, "Prayer and the Paradox of Influencing an Immutable God."

¹⁴⁰ LC 62, KW, 448.

the sinful world stand in opposition to God's love for that same world. Cyprian comments: "It may moreover be thus understood, dearest brethren, that as the Lord commands and admonishes us, to love even our enemies, and to pray too for those who persecute us, we should make petition for those who still are *earth*[ly], who have not yet begun to be heavenly, that in their instance also that will of God may be done, which Christ fulfilled, in the saving and renewing of man's nature."¹⁴¹

How deeply we need God's will to be done amid our confusion and rebellion! No wonder that in this petition our Lord has us praying against ourselves. We sinners pray with Him: "Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done" (Luke 22:42). This petition "presupposes willingness on our part to have our own will broken."¹⁴² It seeks the new, right, holy, and free spirit, or will, of Psalm 51:10 where the Holy Spirit teaches this paradox: "A free will does not want its own way, but looks only to God's will for direction. By so doing it then also remains free, untrammelled and unshackled."¹⁴³ Bloesch notes:

Because God's ways are not our ways and his thoughts are not our thoughts, God's answer will usually be somewhat different from what we request. This is why Luther could say, "It is not a bad but a very good sign if the opposite of what we pray for appears to happen. Just as it is not a good sign if our prayers eventuate in the fulfillment of all we ask for."¹⁴⁴

In that same context, Luther added:

By this His most blessed counsel He renders us capable of receiving His gifts and His works. And we are capable of receiving His works and His counsels only when our own counsels have ceased and our works have stopped and we are made purely passive before God, both with regard to our inner as well as our outward activities. . . . What is said in Is. 28:21 takes place here: "He does a strange work in order to do His own work," and in Ps. 103:11: "As the heavens are high above the earth (that is, not according to our thoughts), so great is His steadfast love toward us, etc."¹⁴⁵

Rather than going too far into such paradoxical complexities, Melancthon reminds us that the third petition is also a simple prayer for obedience to

¹⁴¹ Cyprian, *The Lord's Prayer*, §12, 186.

¹⁴² Graebner, 26.

¹⁴³ AE, 42:48.

¹⁴⁴ Bloesch, 92, quoting Luther from *Lectures on Romans* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), 240.

¹⁴⁵ AE 25:365.

God.¹⁴⁶ In His commands God has revealed His will in a form that is not too high for us (Ps. 131:1; 139:6). He tells us what is good and bad, what He wants for us and what He wants to spare us (cp. Luke 12:47!) and teaches us to pray to be His faithful disciples, doing God's will as He reveals it.¹⁴⁷ In Psalm 40 the Spirit moves the Christian to pray: "I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart" (v 8), though "evils have encompassed me" (v 12).

Humble acquiescence toward God smacks of fatalism for some, but this is a petition of quiet hope. Christ's prayer in the garden ends in the presence of a strengthening angel, not in grudging submission (Luke 22:43).¹⁴⁸ And David leads us into serene certainty: "My heart is not proud, O LORD, my eyes are not haughty; I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me. But I have stilled and quieted my soul; like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me. O Israel, put your hope in the LORD both now and forever" (Ps. 131, NIV).

The Fourth Petition: "Give us this day our daily bread"

In the first three petitions Jesus reminds us that on earth God's name is profaned, His kingly rule faces rebellion, and His gracious will must crush the raging opposition of sin and Satan. The last three petitions address equally grim truths of sin, temptation, and evil.¹⁴⁹ We might conclude that "earth is a desert drear" and that we should pray of nothing but heaven. Instead, the Lord's Prayer next leads us into confident prayer about today. Christian "spirituality" is not disembodied, nor does it neglect physical creation. The tradition of beginning the day with Psalm 95¹⁵⁰ invites us to "sing to the Lord" and gives this reason for our praise: "In his hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also. The sea is his for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land. Oh come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the Lord, *our Maker!*" (vv. 4–6). Christian spirituality is anchored in creation.

Earthly, "daily bread" is the object of the fourth petition. The phrase "daily bread" is both familiar and challenging. Scholars debate the meaning of the

¹⁴⁶ Philip Melancthon, *Melancthon on Christian Doctrine: Loci communes 1555* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1965), 303. So also Luther: "That God's will be done means undoubtedly nothing else than that his commandments are kept, for through these God has revealed his will to us" (AE 42:43).

¹⁴⁷ See also Cyprian: "The will of God, is what Christ has done and taught." *The Lord's Prayer*, §11, 185.

¹⁴⁸ See Thielicke, 73: "It is the hour of angels, the hour of communion with the world of glory, the hour of deep, mysterious, hidden happiness."

¹⁴⁹ See Ebeling, 55: "The prayer for our daily bread stands unpretentiously in between with its face towards natural, everyday, matter-of-fact things."

¹⁵⁰ Psalm 95 is the chief psalm in the office of Matins (Morning Prayer).

word translated “daily.”¹⁵¹ Yet, the petition is not unclear. Jesus teaches us to pray for bread—not steak or cherry cheese cake. And, no matter how we take “daily,” Jesus is clearly teaching us to pray for bread that is needed at present and not for some far tomorrow. His focus is not on luxury or future desires, but the bread on our plate today.

To pray for bread may seem too small a thing after praying at the expansive level of the eternal name, kingdom, and will of God. But God, much more than the devil, is in the details of life. We may forget that by food came the Fall, but God remembers such a small detail. The God of highest heaven is not above lowly bread. “The very greatness of God lies in the fact that he condescends so low.”¹⁵²

God-with-us shared our flesh and broke bread. He knows us better than we know ourselves. He noticed the hunger of the crowds before His disciples did (Mk. 8:1–3). Here He invites us to entrust ourselves to the Father’s daily miracles of gracious provision, as He sends rain from heaven and causes earth to feed man and beast (Ps. 72:6; 147:8; Matt. 5:45). To pray for daily bread is to pray for this promised provision. We pray with confidence, knowing that our Father saw our need before we could ask (Is. 65:24). To pray for bread with Jesus is therefore also to learn thanksgiving, because life is sustained according to the gracious will of our heavenly Father. “In this petition, therefore, we are admonished and taught that men’s affairs in this common outward life do not unfold rashly and occur by chance.”¹⁵³

This petition wars against both anxiety and avarice. It teaches contentment and to wield prayer against life’s worries. In Matthew 6 this petition parallels a warning that follows: “Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble” (Matt. 6:34). Paul echoes this: “But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content” (1 Tim. 6:8). He urges us: “[D]o not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” (Phil. 4:6). Worry recedes as we “receive our daily bread with thanksgiving.”¹⁵⁴ Table prayers are spiritual weapons!

¹⁵¹ See Gibbs, 331. The Greek word ἐπιούσιος, -ον occurs only here in the NT. Scholars are uncertain about which two or more Greek words have been combined to form it. “Bread necessary for existence” assumes a derivation from *epi* plus *ousia*; “bread for the current day” derives from *epi ten ousan*, “bread for tomorrow” derives from *he epiousa hemera*, and “bread that is coming” assumes that the present infinitive of *epeimi* lies behind the word in the text. Gibbs endorses the fourth understanding of the phrase: “it emphasizes that Jesus’ disciples cannot procure or provide today’s bread for themselves; it must be the bread that is drawing near to them from the Father’s provision.” See Chemnitz for the various understandings of “daily” in the Fathers, *The Lord’s Prayer*, 58–61.

¹⁵² Thielicke, 86.

¹⁵³ Chemnitz, *The Lord’s Prayer*, 62.

¹⁵⁴ *Luther’s Small Catechism with Explanation*, 189.

We also need a weapon against greed. Consumer culture sucks us into a whirlpool of desires that make us petulant amid prosperity. Gourmands demand the exotic and fuss about presentation. But a child of God who prays this Word can delight in a morsel of bread. Who is happier? And who is more generous—one who has learned to pray confidently for daily bread or one who is longing for more and better?¹⁵⁵ Recognition of a generous God, not comparative wealth, creates generous people. In this petition our Lord returns to the plural: “give *us* this day our daily bread.” I may have all the bread I need, but I am not praying only for myself in this petition. I pray with those who *are* hungry, and gratefully realize that my plenty is the very means by which some of them may be filled. There is enough for all in most times. Hunger is less often due to a lack of God-given resources than it is to hoarding and greed.

If I may be the instrument by which another receives daily bread, then my own daily bread also comes by means of others. The farmer, the miller, the baker, the trucker, the merchant—all of them and others are God’s daily instruments for feeding me and the world. To see this is to realize that the fourth petition cannot be narrow in scope, dealing only with a slice of bread or the body’s need for food. Luther rightly explains “daily bread” to mean “everything that has to do with the support and needs of the body.”¹⁵⁶ So, while the simplicity of bread compels our prayerful meditation, this petition also rightly leads us into prayers for other needs, from things to the people whose lives touch our own.¹⁵⁷ To pray the fourth petition with Jesus is to pray for the world, *this world*, where neither laziness nor selfishness is a godly option (Ps. 128:2; Eph. 4:28). So it is that “the breaking of bread and prayers” (Acts 2:42¹⁵⁸) always accompany one another, that we pray “for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions” (1 Tim. 2:1–2), and we recognize that by the Word and prayer, all that God has created is made holy (1 Tim. 4:4–5). With Luther we pray for all that daily life requires.¹⁵⁹ By such means God provides for us.

Cyprian suggested that daily bread “may be understood, both in the spiritual and in the simple meaning, seeing that either purport contains a divine aid, for the advancing of our salvation.”¹⁶⁰ By a “spiritual” meaning, Cyprian

¹⁵⁵ Perhaps this is one reason that those who make more money actually give a lower percentage of income to charity than those with less. Rachel Gardyn, “Generosity and Income,” *BNET: The CBS Interactive Business Network*, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m4021/is_11_24/ai_95309979/. See also facts from the 2000 census at http://www.allcountries.org/uscensus/638_charity_contributions_average_dollar_amount_and.html.

¹⁵⁶ *Luther’s Small Catechism with Explanation*, 189.

¹⁵⁷ In Hebrew (bread) refers to food in general as well as to bread in specific, as Chemnitz, *The Lord’s Prayer*, 57, points out, noting that in various passages, “bread” is goat’s milk (Prov. 27:27), cattle feed (Ps. 147:9), and fruit (Jer. 11:19).

¹⁵⁸ This applies whether we consider “breaking of bread” to refer to sharing of food or to the Holy Sacrament.

¹⁵⁹ See “What is meant by daily bread?” SC 3:14, KW, 357.

¹⁶⁰ Cyprian, *The Lord’s Prayer*, §13, 187.

has in mind the One who said, “I am the bread of life” (John 6:35). Having been graciously given Christ, that Bread by which we never fear hunger, all fears of body or soul are vanquished. Instead, with God’s people of old we praise the Lord.

From your lofty abode you water the mountains;
the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.
You cause the grass to grow for the livestock
and plants for man to cultivate,
that he may bring forth food from the earth
and wine to gladden the heart of man,
oil to make his face shine
and bread to strengthen man’s heart [Ps. 104:13–15].

The Fifth Petition: “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us”

Jesus teaches penitent prayer: “Forgive us.”¹⁶¹ This is not provisional, as in “If we have sinned in any way, please forgive.” No, we *have* sinned and Jesus compels us to admit it. We are God’s children, justified by grace through faith in Christ alone. His cross is at the heart of this petition and of all Christian prayer. Pride wilts in the face of the clear identification of our need for forgiveness. Cyprian draws the obvious conclusion: “That no man may plume himself with the pretence of innocency, and perish more wretchedly through self-exaltation, he is instructed and taught that he commits sin every day, by being commanded to pray every day for his sins.”¹⁶² Humility prevents us from praying “as we forgive those who trespass against us” as hypocrites. Luther warns those who “are blind to their own sin and so magnify that of their neighbor that they can declare: ‘I will not and cannot forgive him. I will never be reconciled to him.’”¹⁶³ It may be true that a refusal to forgive harms the unforgiving individual psychologically, but a far greater danger is the potential judgment that comes of a proud refusal to forgive others, as Luther reminds us.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶¹ The most common English form of the fifth petition is “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” But the less commonly used version, referring to “debts,” follows the Greek more closely. A debt indicates a failed obligation, not a mere misstep (“trespass”). The word “debt” will not allow us to quibble or trivialize, for we owe God and our neighbor nothing less than the obligation of love. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27). See Thielicke, 91–93.

¹⁶² Cyprian, *The Lord’s Prayer*, §15, 189–190.

¹⁶³ AE 42:65.

¹⁶⁴ “Beware O man! Not he who offends you but you who refuses to forgive inflicts a harm on you greater than the whole world could do.” AE 42:66. Luther adds (p. 67) that gossip is a frequent mark of unforgiving pride toward another: “O you hypocrite and charlatan! If you really were your neighbor’s friend you would keep silent and not spread his misfortune with such delight and relish. Your accursed displeasure would change into pity and compassion.

Only God's humbling work can prevent such pride that assumes that "my sins are forgivable," but not those of another. Yet, there is more here than a lesson in humility. These words are a promise. "God's promise is that he will hear our prayers. This promise implies the remission of sins, for nothing entitles us to be heard except the mercy of God in Christ. Therefore we can pray only in the confidence that God is willing to overlook our sins."¹⁶⁵ In a beautiful irony, we are doubly assured of God's forgiveness by the fact that God actually *commands* us to pray to be forgiven: "by this commandment [God] makes it clear that he will not cast us out or drive us away, even though we are sinners; he wishes rather to draw us to himself so that we may humble ourselves before him, lament our misery and plight, and pray for grace and help."¹⁶⁶ When God so graciously commands this, it's as if a wealthy man *insisted* on giving a feast to a beggar who only dared to hope for a morsel.

This astounding generosity provides the only weapon against our unforgiving hearts. Every pastor, sooner or later, will hear someone confess that the hurt caused by another's sin is so deep that the individual wants to forgive, but cannot. "Pastor, I just can't forget it." The person molested as a child, someone unjustly fired, the family of a murder victim—these and similar situations have often left Christians struggling and tearfully admitting that they cannot forgive from their own hearts. Such raw honesty we dare not trivialize. But it can be addressed by the strong love of God in Christ.

In the command and promise of the fifth petition, our Lord gives an all-encompassing plural pronoun: "forgive *us*"! Consider, first, that Christ, who became sin for us "that we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21), leads us in this prayer for our own forgiveness even as He also prayed "Father, forgive them" (Luke 23:34) from the cross for us. That He "becomes sin" for us results in atonement even for our sins of pride and "unforgiveness." Here, too, His redeeming work is greater than our sin. He who atones for our sin joins Himself to us in order to free us also from this sin.

Second, the "forgive *us*" of the fifth petition is placed on our lips so that we are praying for all sinners, including the ones for whom we can feel no heartfelt forgiveness. It is not hypocrisy to pray against my feelings—it is my only hope for victory against those feelings which, left unchecked, would drive me from Christ. In so doing, I pray for an absolution far greater than any I could give by myself—I pray with Christ and His church for *us* and the forgiveness of *our* sins. This isn't for "me" alone, rather it assures me of forgiveness for me *and* my neighbor—including the one who gravely wounded me. Such grace extends to all, even to me when, in pride or trauma, I am blinded to my own

You would excuse him, cover up his wrongdoing, bid others to be silent, pray to God on his behalf, admonish him as a brother, and help him to rise again."

¹⁶⁵ Vilmos Vajta, *Luther on Worship* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958), 162. See SC, III, KW, 16.

¹⁶⁶ LC 3:11, KW, 442.

serious guilt. Such grace that forgives the world cannot exclude me or my neighbor. Instead it leads us all to pray together, “Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world, have mercy on *us*.” With David we pray that God, who might justly condemn us, would instead create and renew “a clean heart” and “a right spirit” within us (Ps. 51:10).

The Sixth Petition: Lead us not into temptation

Luther says, “This petition brings to our attention the miserable life that we lead here on earth. It is nothing more than one great trial.”¹⁶⁷ His comment might seem an exaggeration if not outright nonsense to many. After all, one does not have to be delusional to recognize the blessings of this created world and to say, “Life is good.” Yet, Luther also points to another fact: “Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8). Satan’s roar may often be drowned out by the relative ease of our age and our droning complacency, but our Lord gives a petition to shake us out of any deceit, one that He repeated just before His own testing in Gethsemane. “Pray that you may not enter into temptation” (Luke 22:40).

A question arises: Why do we ask our *heavenly Father* not to lead us into temptation? There is something frightening in such language. It suggests that, in some way, God is connected with temptation. James tells us that “God himself tempts no one” (1:13), which Luther’s catechism strongly affirms.¹⁶⁸ Yet, the petition Jesus gives us is addressed to the Father and it addresses *Him* saying, “Lead us not into temptation.” It does not say, “Do not let *Satan* lead us into temptation.”

We rightly soften this by speaking of what God “allows” rather than what He “purposefully wills,” but even then we need to ask: Is God somehow connected to the temptations we face?¹⁶⁹ Luther helps us to remember that God’s grace is experienced in a world of sin, death, and Satan. Though these enemies assault us, they are really Christ’s enemies. We face them as He leads us in the battle of life, yet we also pray for relief from such conflict.¹⁷⁰ Life here and now is such that we do face the reality that is translated into English as “temptation.” Jeffrey Gibbs helps us understand this reality without softening it by noting that the sixth petition *must* be understood together with the seventh, “but deliver us from evil.” Noting that the Spirit led Jesus to be tempted in

¹⁶⁷ AE 42:71.

¹⁶⁸ “It is true that God tempts no one. . . .” SC, III, 18.

¹⁶⁹ Note the question as Guardini, 78, puts it: “Can God permit temptation to become so severe that we *must* fall? If we deny that He can, and that, in view of His divinity, He may, we are making God innocuous.”

¹⁷⁰ See Luther’s comments on Psalm 110:2b: “We must live in the midst of Christ’s enemies They are not especially our enemies but His, and they plague us because of Him. He will rule and conquer in this manner: even though His Christians feel themselves in deepest anxiety, weak, and the victims of death and hell, He will nevertheless be mighty in them against the devil’s fright and terrors of sin and death by means of His comfort, power, victory, joy, and life.” AE 13:279–280.

the wilderness (Matt. 4:1), he identifies the connection of temptation to battle with Satan. This prayer then reflects “Jesus’ wilderness combat with Satan, in a sort of grim-faced, realistic fashion. It will be the Father’s purpose at times to bring Jesus’ disciples into confrontation and conflict with Satan and his temptations.”¹⁷¹

The sixth petition reflects an “alien work” of God who kills and makes alive (Deut. 32:39), and who

... does not want us to follow the example of the Manichaeans and imagine that there are several gods: one, the source of all good; the other, the source of all evil. God wants us to regard the evils that we experience as coming to us with His permission. If He had not permitted it, the devil would never have afflicted Job so fearfully (Job 1:12). God permits evils to come to us; for it is His will that, when we have been chastened, we cast ourselves on His mercy.¹⁷²

Even God’s good Law is a temptation of sorts to us. It is too good for us sinners. As God leads us to know His truth about how we are to live, we are easily intimidated because He is too high and holy—His Law is too pure for us sinners. Like Adam and Eve, we want to flee from His overwhelming holiness, only compounding our unholiness. This paradox influenced Luther to understand the strange twelfth verse of Psalm 2, “Kiss the Son lest he be angry with you,” as an invitation to flee *toward* God’s forgiving embrace in the person of the Son, rather than away from His just judgments. “There is great force, then, in the word ‘kiss’; for it indicates that we should embrace this Son with our whole heart and see or hear nothing else than Christ, and Him crucified.”¹⁷³

We *will* face temptation of every sort, and we are no match for any of it. Our Lord has us pray in light of our weakness and not from foolish brava-do.¹⁷⁴ We “cast ourselves on His mercy” because we are helpless by ourselves against temptations even to obvious sins—disrespect toward authority, violence, lust, greed, dishonesty, envy, and jealousy. How much more are we utterly hopeless in the face of temptation to sins we do not even recognize: remaking God according to our desires, ignoring His Word, profaning His name, and despising His Gospel and the means by which the Spirit makes His truth known to us? These are the sins that lead to the “great shame and vice”

¹⁷¹ Gibbs, 344. His discussion of the sixth petition is on pages 337–345.

¹⁷² AE 13:135.

¹⁷³ AE 12:88.

¹⁷⁴ Cyprian: “When we thus pray that we may not enter into temptation, we are cautioned by this prayer of our own infirmity and weakness, lest any presumptuously exalt himself. . . .” *The Lord’s Prayer*, §17, 192.

of “false belief” and “despair”¹⁷⁵ and would separate us from faith in our only Savior. These are the greatest dangers humanity faces. “For this is exactly what temptation means: to allow oneself to be torn away from God.”¹⁷⁶

We learn to pray “Lead us not into temptation” from the only one who has both faced and withstood every temptation (Heb 4:15). We pray with the faithful: “Set a watch before my mouth, O Lord, and guard the door of my lips. Let not my heart incline to any evil thing. Let me not be occupied in wickedness with evildoers” (Ps. 141:3–4a).¹⁷⁷

*The Seventh Petition: But deliver us from evil*¹⁷⁸

The first word of this petition, “but,” means the sixth and seventh petitions are inseparable. “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”¹⁷⁹ We are not defenseless in the face of temptation’s traps and snares, for a final deliverance from all evil is promised—such confidence is ours as we pray in and with Christ. “Evil” is left undefined by our Lord in His prayer. It can be personal, as “the evil one, Satan,”¹⁸⁰ or viewed in the context of sin, or generalized as all that is contrary to good. Rather than quibble about a specific sense of “evil,” it seems wisest to accept with simplicity Christ’s invitation to cry out for help in the face of a life where evil of one kind or another is never absent.

Death is the surest sign of evil’s presence. As such, “Deliver us from evil” echoes the prayer from the cross: “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46). So The Small Catechism reminds us that we are asking our Father to “give us a blessed end.”¹⁸¹ Yet, even when death seems far off, this petition condenses all of Christian prayer into a phrase. We pray because evil surrounds us and invades us. The sunniest day is fraught with the power of sin, death, and Satan. Unlike the optimists of every age, there is no illusion in the Christian faith about everyone and everything being “basically good.” There is no one, no time, no place exempt from the evil one and his power. Evil

¹⁷⁵ *Luther’s Small Catechism with Explanation*, 21.

¹⁷⁶ Thielicke, 119.

¹⁷⁷ Translation is from *Evening Prayer, Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978), 145. The office and same translation are also found in *Lutheran Worship* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1982), 254 and *LSB*, 246.

¹⁷⁸ The brief version of the Lord’s Prayer, from Luke, does not include this petition. Just as the SC treated the third petition of a summary of the first and second petitions, Luther treats the seventh as a summary of the whole prayer.

¹⁷⁹ See comments on the sixth petition and Gibbs, 344. Chemnitz points out that the adversative can rightly be understood to connect the last two petitions into one central thought, presented negatively and then positively.

¹⁸⁰ The use of the definite article in the original Greek may indicate that “the evil [one]” is intended.

¹⁸¹ *Luther’s Small Catechism with Explanation*, 22. Chemnitz (*The Lord’s Prayer*, 93) adds: “We ask that we may not die carelessly in our sins, unprepared without repentance (John 8:24), but that he would grant us a godly and saving end of this life. We ask to die in the Lord (Rev. 14:13).”

poisons even our best, Spirit-given intentions: “the evil that I do not want is what I keep on doing” (Rom. 7:19).

This is not the way our culture ordinarily thinks of evil. Our era tends to see evil only in other forms: environmental degradation, warfare, terrorism, corporate misbehavior, and political opponents. We are less able to see the sub-surface of evil: rebellion against God and His Law, spiritual deceit, and Satan. Often such things are viewed as nothing more than the left-over relics of unenlightened medievalism. Yet, “Just because we do not see a thing or have forgotten how to see it does not mean that it no longer exists.”¹⁸² The evil that compels our prayers is surely both the grim realities that we see and also those we do not see. In the historic Litany the church rightly prays to be delivered from “all evil,” everything from “pestilence and famine” to “everlasting death.”¹⁸³ None of our human systems has resolved economic evils; how much less have we defeated the ultimate evils of sin, Satan, and hell!¹⁸⁴

Our weakness compels our prayers; it does not constrict them. To pray for God’s deliverance is bigger and richer than our imagination. It certainly is not escapist in tone. Paul reminds us that the force of evil is so great that it can be faced only by those who are “strong in the Lord and the power of his might,” protected by “the full armor of God” (see Eph. 6:10–17). Note how Paul’s urgent appeal ends:

And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints. Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.¹⁸⁵

Because of evil we pray with fellow saints and for them—for the Gospel to be fearlessly proclaimed. Evil’s depth is great, but so is its breadth. We pray in plural, “deliver *us* from evil,” praying for all the church and for the world that needs to know “the mystery of the gospel.” “My situation is not the only situation covered by this prayer. I suddenly find myself confronted by an infinite society of sufferers in which I am but a drop in the ocean.”¹⁸⁶ Here again praying the psalms enriches the content of our prayers. There

¹⁸² Thielicke, 93.

¹⁸³ *LSB*, 288.

¹⁸⁴ Evil is so great that Luther rightly calls the seventh petition the “summary” of prayer, *Luther’s Small Catechism with Explanation*, 22. He also argues that this petition rightly comes at the end, not the beginning of prayer, lest we seek merely a deliverance of our own definition and forget “God’s honor, his name, and his will.” *AE* 42:75.

¹⁸⁵ Eph. 6:18–20 NIV. Commenting on these verses, John Koenig suggests that praying in the Spirit means “praising and thanking God in the name of Jesus.” Koenig, 157.

¹⁸⁶ Ebeling, *The Lord’s Prayer*, 105.

we learn to pray not only “O Lord, how many are *my* foes. . . . deliver *me*, O my God” (Ps. 3:1, 7, NIV), but also, “Help *us*, O God of our salvation, for the glory of your name; deliver *us*, and atone for *our* sins, for your name’s sake!” (Ps. 79:9, emphases added).

Evil is all too overwhelming, and yet we are not overcome. “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:21). Not our paltry personal good, but only the good that is Christ and is ours in Him. Christ, and Christ alone, is the good who overcomes evil and so is our courage and confidence. “But having said, *Deliver us from evil*, there remains nothing beyond for us to ask for, after petition made for God’s protection from evil; for that gained, we stand secure and safe, against all things that the Devil and the world work against us.”¹⁸⁷ Even in the face of evil’s awesome power, our prayers are confident. He who did no evil (Luke 23:22) has overcome it for us. Christ is our confidence for He “gave himself for our sins *to deliver us from the present evil age*, according to the will of our God and Father” (Gal. 1:4, emphasis added). In such a way the Lord’s Prayer takes us from the ebullient confidence of a little child whose heavenly Father is listening, to that seasoned serenity of aging saints whose confident, “Deliver us from evil,” means that they are also ready to “depart in peace” because they have seen the Father’s salvation in the face of Jesus Christ (Luke 2:29; 2 Cor. 4:6).

¹⁸⁷ Cyprian, *The Lord’s Prayer*, §18, 192.

Conclusion

It has become so customary at the end of prayer to say, “Amen,” that it is often meaningless. Both children and adults frequently understand the Amen to mean, essentially, “The end.” That the word actually means, “surely” or “truly,” is worthy of emphasis.¹⁸⁸ It calls to mind the importance of earnestness and sincerity in prayer. To add our Amen when another prays or to affirm it after the Lord’s Prayer or a psalm is a claim of personal involvement and affirmation—this is also *our* prayer, *our* confession, *our* earnest and sincere desire. Its usage in Scripture is no mere formality, but a reminder that nothing in the true faith is our invention or entirely individual in nature. God declares the truth, He directs our lives and our prayers, and He bids us to affirm that all His Word and work is “surely” and “truly” good (see Deut. 27:15–26, where Israel is commanded to affirm God’s Word with their “Amen.”). As we pray in worship, only one may speak aloud, but the Amen of the assembly ought to mean nothing less than our wholehearted affirmation. Similarly, when we pray with Christ, using His words, the Amen makes His prayer our own.

All this affirms certain aspects of what may be called both “Evangelical” and “Catholic” emphases about Christian prayer. On the one hand, Evangelical Christians are noted for often insisting that prayer should be personal and meaningful—a legitimate priority. Luther had long before expressed that very concern: “You should also know that I do not want you to recite all these words in your prayer. That would make it nothing but idle chatter and prattle, read word for word out of a book as were the rosaries by the laity and the prayers of the priests and monks. Rather do I want your heart to be stirred. . . .”¹⁸⁹ Sincere, devout prayer alone is genuine prayer.

On the other hand, many Christians assume that such a concern means that one can never make use of another person’s prayer—“reading from a book.” Such a perspective criticizes liturgical or memorized prayers, the prayers of church tradition in the daily offices, and even praying the Psalter or Lord’s Prayer, saying such practices are “too Catholic.” Luther’s criticism of prayers that are “word for word out of a book” might seem to endorse this view at first. Yet, in the quotation from the previous paragraph, Luther goes on to complete the final sentence in this way: “Rather do I want your heart to be stirred *and guided* concerning the thoughts which ought to be comprehended in the Lord’s Prayer.”¹⁹⁰

That Jesus teaches us to pray, providing actual words and content, that the Bible includes the prayers of the Psalter, and that the Word of God calls us to

¹⁸⁸ See אָמֵן, defined as “surely!” in William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1971), 20. The root of the term is “to believe.”

¹⁸⁹ AE 43:198.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

speaking a sincere Amen to His truth—all of this clearly indicates that Christian prayer is both free *and* disciplined. It is heartfelt, *and* mindful. It is subjective *and* objective. It is joyful *and* tearful. It is individual *and* corporate. It is words unique to each individual *and* words common to every believer. It is both the utter simplicity of the infant's cry, *Abba*, *and* the challenge of praying with saints of the past, present, and future. We pray as individuals, pouring out the secret things known only to us and God, *and* we pray as Christ's body, the church, speaking the common needs of all humanity.

What is Christian prayer? It is the response of the redeemed child of God to his heavenly Father. It is the cry of the justified—tearful or joyful (Ps. 28:2, 7)—but always springing forth from faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. Why do we pray? Because God the Holy Spirit opens our lips and fills hearts and mouths with praise (Ps. 51:15)—because of command and promise, because of words God has given and burdens we cannot bear. How do we pray? With Christ. Always, ever, only in Him, in His words, in the confidence only He can give.

We pray in a thousand tongues and a thousand ways. But, most of all, we just cannot stop praying, for we pray by the Spirit of Christ who has brought us to faith in our Father.

... a Christian always has the Spirit of supplication with him, and his heart is continually sending forth sighs and petitions to God, regardless of whether he happens to be eating or drinking or working. ... Nevertheless, I say, outward prayer must also go on, both individual prayer and corporate prayer. In the morning and in the evening, at table and whenever he has time. ... Such prayer is a precious thing and a powerful defense against the devil and his assaults. For in it, all Christendom combines its forces with one accord; and the harder it prays, the more effective it is and the sooner it is heard. ... Thus it is certain that whatever still stands and endures, whether it is in the spiritual or in the secular realm, is being preserved through prayer.¹⁹¹

¹⁹¹ AE 21:139–140.



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