

UNITED
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*Understanding and Praying
the Lord's Prayer*

PETER E. ROUSSAKIS

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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>vii</i>
CHAPTER ONE	
Introducing the Lord's Prayer.....	1
CHAPTER TWO	
Presenting an Overview	7
CHAPTER THREE	
Noting the Jewish Setting	15
CHAPTER FOUR	
Addressing God	25
CHAPTER FIVE	
Hallowing God's Name.....	33
CHAPTER SIX	
Entering God's Kingdom	43
CHAPTER SEVEN	
Increasing in God's Kingdom	53
CHAPTER EIGHT	
Imagining the Kingdom of God's Glory	61
CHAPTER NINE	
Passing Into the Kingdom of God's Glory	71

CHAPTER TEN	
Doing God's Will	81
CHAPTER ELEVEN	
Depending on God.....	91
CHAPTER TWELVE	
Requesting Daily Provisions.....	101
CHAPTER THIRTEEN	
Seeking Forgiveness	109
CHAPTER FOURTEEN	
Forgiving Others.....	121
CHAPTER FIFTEEN	
Praying for Leniency	133
CHAPTER SIXTEEN	
Pleading for Deliverance	141
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN	
Praising God.....	151
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN	
Summarizing the Lord's Prayer	157
NINETEEN	
Praying the Lord's Prayer	169
<i>Review Guide</i>	181
<i>Bibliography</i>	187
<i>Index</i>	199
<i>Biographical Note</i>	206

Preface

Katelyn was thirteen when I was called as Pastor of the First Brethren Church of Burlington, Indiana. She had been suffering from a disease called ulcerative colitis which necessitated her being in the hospital periodically to receive medications and blood transfusions. It was a hard road for a young teenager. Some five years later, her condition worsened significantly. In great pain, she was rushed to the hospital. While in the emergency room, her spiritual reflex action was to pray the Lord's Prayer. She did so, over and over and over. Finally her circumstances stabilized well enough to prepare her for surgery to remove her large intestine. The surgery was successful, leaving her with a colostomy. Fortunately after several months, it was possible to reverse it, and she is doing very well.

Katey could have prayed her own prayers. However, to her it seemed to be a desperately important moment in her life, and the Lord's Prayer, *the* prayer of prayers for the Christian, was the prayer through which her most urgent pleas could be expressed. Later Katey said she appreciated so much my series of fourteen sermons on the Lord's Prayer. She said: "You're getting through." Praying the Lord's Prayer gave her strength to cope, trust in God, and to go on.

Christians everywhere, whatever their denominational or non-denominational stripe, are uniquely linked together by "the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love." That tie, Jesus Christ, provided disciples with instruction on how to pray and what to say. Praying together the prayer he taught contributes to the binding of our hearts, and provides a prayer which is so sacred for the Christian, that in times of trial as well as ease, we may turn to God through the praying of *the* prayer the Savior provided for his followers.

UNITED IN PRAYER

The overall objectives herein include contributing to the ‘binding’ through an understanding of Jesus’ timely instruction, and through intentional, meaningful praying of the Lord’s Prayer in public worship. Moreover, to offer parishioners a greater awareness and deeper knowledge of the truths encapsulated in the prayer, and to assist pastors and teachers in their ministries of preaching and teaching on this subject, this volume is offered.

For those Christian communities where the Lord’s Prayer is prayed regularly in worship, it is likely that many parishioners are unaware of the full meanings of each of the phrases of the prayer; thus the need for pastors to provide instruction, that the prayer may have its greatest impact in the lives of those who utilize it in private and corporate devotion. Upon examination of the phrases of the prayer, which forms the greater body of this volume, it will be seen that contained in these five verses of scripture, Matthew 6:9-13, the version most commonly used throughout Christendom, there is a goldmine of truth, a mini-encyclopedia of Christian belief; and, therefore, when we pray the Lord’s Prayer, we as Christians are not merely praying the prayer Jesus taught, we are in a fashion affirming the truths contained within the preface, the petitions, and the closing statement of praise of the prayer. Not only so, Christians are united, if not in all ways, at least in prayer, and in particular in the praying of the Lord’s Prayer. Unity through learning and praying are worthy endeavors, to which this volume is dedicated.

Before presenting an explication of the prayer’s meanings, especially for those who would like to pursue deeper study of this “Prayer of prayers,” an *Introduction* to major sources of study of the prayer is presented, followed by an *Overview* of the prayer’s scriptural context, inclusions and order, and then an introduction to appreciating the *Jewish Setting* of the prayer. The concluding chapter of the work will again take up the theme of Christians being united through learning about the prayer and praying it together, and through a consideration of the various potentialities of praying the prayer. It is the desire of this writer that through the content, reading and application of these pages the work of God may be advanced.

P.E.R., Burlington, Indiana, Spring 2007

CHAPTER ONE

Introducing the Lord's Prayer

*Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.*
(Matt. 6:9-13 NIV)

Since the early church Christians have been praying the Lord's Prayer in public worship. Thomas Aquinas (c.1225-1274) referred to it as the best of all prayers.¹ Nicolas Ayo described the prayer as seminal of all Christian prayer.² In the opening remarks of his comprehensive work on the Lord's Prayer, Thomas Watson (1620-1688) described Jesus' words as a "directory for prayer" and a "system or body of divinity."³ Most Christians, we would think, would resonate affirmatively with the idea of the prayer being a directory or outline for appropriate prayer. The notion of the Lord's Prayer being an outline for Christian prayer has been accepted generally. John Calvin (1509-1564) referred to it as "a prescribed form."⁴ Martin Luther (1483-1546) called

¹ Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologiae* Vol. 39 (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964), II, II, 83, 9.

² Nicolas Ayo. *The Lord's Prayer: A Survey Theological and Literary* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame, 1992), 6.

³ Thomas Watson. *The Lord's Prayer* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1993), 1.

⁴ John T. McNeill, ed. *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), Vol. 2, III, XX, 34.

UNITED IN PRAYER

it “a brief formula” for prayer.⁵ Matthew Henry (1662-1714) described it as “a method for praying.”⁶ More contemporary labels include Frank Stagg’s traditional “Model Prayer,”⁷ David Jeremiah’s “road map for prayer,”⁸ and Max Lucado’s “floor plan to our spiritual house.”⁹

The other remark by Watson, that the Lord’s Prayer is “a system or body of divinity,” may not be understood or appreciated fully by parishioners of any tradition unless a series of sermons or classes were offered explaining the meaning of each phrase of the prayer. Through such ways it may bring to peoples’ awareness a dimension of the prayer not previously considered. Indeed, presenting such a consideration is another purpose of this study.

This second remark of Watson’s was based on the truth of the prayer’s composition and upon a statement of Tertullian (c.150-220), who, in his treatise *De Oratione* (“On Prayer”), called the Lord’s Prayer a “compendium of the whole gospel” (*breviarium totius evangelii*).¹⁰ Other commentators have spoken similarly. Cyprian (200-258) said the Lord’s Prayer is a “comprehensive and sublime compend.”¹¹ Luther characterized the trilogy of the Catechism (the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord’s Prayer), as a “digest of doctrine.”¹² G.

⁵ Martin Luther. “The Sermon on the Mount: Sermons,” *Luther’s Works* Vol. 21, Jaroslav Pelikan, ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), 145.

⁶ Matthew Henry. *Matthew Henry’s Commentary On the Whole Bible* Vol. 5 (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 59.

⁷ Frank Stagg. “Matthew,” *The Broadman Bible Commentary* Vol. 8 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1969), 115.

⁸ David Jeremiah. *Prayer The Great Adventure* (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, Inc.), 69.

⁹ Max Lucado. *The Great House of God* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1997), 7.

¹⁰ Watson, 1. “Compendium” is Watson’s and Ayo’s (p.5) rendering of Tertullian’s “breviarium.” “An epitome of the whole Gospel” is the translation given by the Rev. S. Thelwall in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 3, Alexander Roberts & James Donaldson, eds. (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 681.

¹¹ Cyprian. “Elucidation III,” *Ante-Nicene Fathers* Vol.5, Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds. (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 559.

¹² F. Samuel Janzow. *Luther’s Large Catechism* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1978), 12.

Introducing the Lord's Prayer

Campbell Morgan described the prayer as being a part of the “Manifesto of the King,”¹³ referring to the Sermon on the Mount of which the Lord’s Prayer is a part in Matthew’s Gospel. William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas call it “public theology.”¹⁴ In Philip Schaff’s *A Christian Catechism for Sunday Schools and Families* (1880), the famous church historian described the Lord’s Prayer as “the gospel in a nutshell.”¹⁵ And Nicolas Ayo commented: “The Lord’s Prayer is a precis of the whole gospel, the distillation of the substance of the good news.”¹⁶

Individual works which masterfully dissect the phrases of the Lord’s Prayer, and which thereby attest to the prayer as saturated with doctrine, include Nicolas’ Ayo’s work (1992). Karl Barth’s (1886-1968) treatise, *Prayer*, originally published in 1949, is a most interesting and valuable commentary on the prayer from the view of the Protestant Reformers. Thomas Watson’s work mentioned above provides a thorough explication of every phrase of the prayer. Other recent volumes listed in the bibliography provide interesting insight. Few, however, are comprehensive; thus one justification for this study.

We may say, therefore, that the Lord’s Prayer contains an *encapsulation of Christian belief*. Because it does, it serves as an outline for and a potential source, when explicated as such, of a significant body of Christian doctrine. Moreover, a logical deduction is that the text of the Lord’s Prayer serves Christians in worship as one unique and readily accessible confession of faith. While the Lord’s Prayer is not a creed in a formal sense of the term, because it is an arrangement of specific theological themes and concerns, it has confessional import. Needless to say, however, the text by itself would be of little value as a confession of faith unless it were prayed, unless the text were recited and of course

¹³ G. Campbell Morgan. *The Practice of Prayer* (Belfast, Northern Ireland: Ambassador Productions, Ltd, 1995), 57.

¹⁴ William H. Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas. *Lord, Teach Us: The Lord’s Prayer and the Christian Life* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 17.

¹⁵ Philip Schaff. *A Christian Catechism for Sunday Schools and Families* (Philadelphia: American Sunday School Union, 1880), 29.

¹⁶ Ayo, 6.

UNITED IN PRAYER

believed. Again, more than merely enabling the community to offer a common prayer to God, because the Lord's Prayer is a compendium of the Gospel, praying it together in the corporate worship setting may be thought of as a way the community of faith professes its faith and is unified, a position taken by J. Harold Ellens in his "Communication Theory and Petitionary Prayer,"¹⁷ which will be highlighted in the closing chapter.

In addition to those mentioned above, a number of other sources are worthy of note, resources which reflect this writer's suggestions for further study and which have contributed to the writing of the present volume. They include the commentaries of John Calvin, William Barclay, Matthew Henry, and Frank Stagg. Two collections of articles are especially valuable. *The Lord's Prayer and Other Prayer Texts from the Greco-Roman Era*, edited by Princeton Seminary's James H. Charlesworth, provides an extensive bibliography. The other is *The Lord's Prayer and Jewish Liturgy*, edited by Jakob Petuchowski, Research Professor of Jewish Theology and Liturgy at Hebrew Union College, and Michael Brocke, Professor of Judaic Studies at the University of Regensburg, Germany, in which is found a number of essays originally delivered at an inter-denominational conference in Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany in 1973 sponsored by the Oration Dominica Foundation. The topic for discussion was the Lord's Prayer, with the objective of identifying the common affirmations of Christians and Jews which underlie the prayer. Of the inclusions in this collection, Jean Carmignac's "The Spiritual Wealth of the Lord's Prayer" is significant because the reader is introduced to Carmignac's *Reserches sur le Notre Pere* in which he provided over eighty pages of bibliography on the subject.

Also included in the Petuchowski and Brocke volume is Josef Bommer's "The Lord's Prayer in Pastoral Usage," which explores what could be termed the ministry of the Lord's Prayer in the parish. Herbert Jochum's "Teaching the Lord's Prayer" brings to the reader's attention the role the prayer has played in catechetical instruction and

¹⁷J. Harold Ellens. "Communication Theory and Petitionary Prayer," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* Vol. 5, no. 1 (1977): 48-54.

Introducing the Lord's Prayer

how it may be used in today's churches in relevant fashion.

More popular works which offer interesting insights include Brian Dodd's *Praying Jesus' Way* (1997), a collection of sermons. David Jeremiah's *Prayer the Great Adventure* (1997) discusses the Lord's Prayer as a means of teaching what the Bible says about prayer in general. In Max Lucado's *The Great House of God* (1997) the author compares the Christian's spiritual life to the care of the rooms of a house, each one described in terms of one of the phrases of Jesus' prayer. The two offerings by Kenneth Stevenson, *Abba Father: Understanding and Using the Lord's Prayer* (2000) and *The Lord's Prayer: A Text in Tradition* (2004), are masterful. Additional volumes are listed in the bibliography.