

The prayer Jesus taught us

Lesson 6 - Give us today our daily bread

1 Introduction

We are God's children. What can be more childlike than this petition in which we pray for our daily bread, a word that describes all those physical, human and spiritual gifts we need to live. With the confidence of children we say: "Give us this day what we need."

Victor Hoagland, C.P. , *The Prayer Jesus Taught Us*

Though Deut. 8:3 states, "one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord," yet one cannot live without bread.

Mr. Storage's Closet, *A Brief Exegetical Study of the Lord's Prayer*

One would have thought that this is the one petition of the Lord's Prayer about the meaning of which there could have been no possible doubt. It seems on the face of it to be the simplest and the most direct of them all. But it is the fact that many interpreters have offered many interpretations of it. Before we think of its simple and obvious meaning, let us look at some of the other explanations which have been offered.

(i) The bread has been identified with the bread of the Lord's Supper. From the very beginning the Lord's Prayer has been closely connected with the Lord's Table. In the very first orders of service which we possess it is always laid down that the Lord's Prayer should be prayed at the Lord's Table, and some have taken this petition as a prayer to be granted the daily privilege of sitting at the Table of our Lord, and of eating the spiritual food which a man receives there.

(ii) The bread has been identified with the spiritual food of the word of God. We sometimes sing the hymn:

Break thou the bread of life,
Dear Lord, to me,
As thou didst break the loaves
Beside the sea.
Beyond the sacred page
I seek thee, Lord,
My spirit pants for thee,
O living word."

So this petition has been taken to be a prayer for the true teaching, the true doctrine, the essential truth, which are in the scriptures and the word of God, and which are indeed food for a man's mind and heart and soul.

(iii) The bread has been taken to stand for Jesus himself. Jesus called himself the bread of life ([John 6:33-35](#)), and this has been taken to be a prayer that daily we may be fed on him who is the living bread. [...] So then this petition has been taken as a prayer that we too might be cheered and strengthened with Christ the living bread.

(iv) This petition has been taken in a purely Jewish sense. The bread has been taken to be the bread of the heavenly kingdom. Luke tells how one of the bystanders said to Jesus: "Blessed is he who shall eat bread in the Kingdom of God" ([Luke 14:15](#)). The Jews had a strange yet vivid idea. They held that when the Messiah came, and when the golden age dawned, there would be what they called the Messianic banquet, at which the chosen ones of God would sit down.

Although we need not agree that any one of these explanations is the main meaning of this petition, we need not reject any of them as false. They all have their own truth and their own relevance.

The difficulty of interpreting this petition was increased by the fact that there was very considerable doubt as to the meaning of the word *epiousios*, which is the word which the Revised Standard Version translates "daily." [...] When we see that this is a simple petition for the needs of the everyday, certain tremendous truths emerge from it.

(i) It tells us that God cares for our bodies. Jesus showed us that; he spent so much time healing men's diseases and satisfying their physical hunger. He was anxious when he thought that the crowd who had followed him out into the lonely places had a long road home, and no food to eat before they set out upon it. We do well to remember that God is interested in our bodies. Any teaching which belittles, and despises, and slanders the body is wrong.[...]

(ii) This petition teaches us to pray for our daily bread, for bread for the coming day. It teaches us to live one day at a time, and not to worry and be anxious about the distant and the unknown future. When Jesus taught his disciples to pray this petition, there is little doubt that his mind was going back to the story of the manna in the wilderness. The children of Israel were starving in the wilderness. and God sent them the manna. the food from heaven; but there was one condition--they must gather only enough for their immediate needs. If they tried to gather too much, and to store it up, it went bad. They had to be satisfied with enough for the day. [...] This petition tells us to live one day at a time. It forbids the anxious worry which is so characteristic of the life which has not learned to trust God.

(iii) By implication this petition gives God his proper place. It admits that it is from God we receive the food which is necessary to support life. No man has ever created a seed which will grow. The scientist can analyse a seed into its constituent elements, but no synthetic seed would ever grow. All living things come from God. Our food, therefore, is the direct gift of God.

(iv) This petition very wisely reminds us of how prayer works. If a man prayed this prayer, and then sat back and waited for bread to fall into his hands, he would certainly

starve. It reminds us that prayer and work go hand in hand and that when we pray we must go on to work to make our prayers come true. It is true that the living seed comes from God, but it is equally true that it is man's task to grow and to cultivate that seed. [...] God's bounty and man's toil must combine. Prayer, like faith, without works is dead. When we pray this petition we are recognizing two basic truths--that without God we can do nothing, and that without our effort and co-operation God can do nothing for us.

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

William Barclay, *Matthew*, pp. 215-219

2 Physical sustenance

What is daily bread? Just enough for one day. Here Jesus is speaking to people who have natural needs of the flesh, who are subject to the necessities of nature. He does not pretend that we are angels.

He condescends to the infirmity of our nature in giving us his commands. The severity of nature does not permit you to go without food. So for the maturing of your life, he says, I require necessary food, not a complete freedom from natural necessities. But note how even in things that are bodily, spiritual correlations abound. For it is not for riches or frills that we pray. It is not for wastefulness or extravagant clothing that we pray, but only for bread. And only for bread on a daily basis, so as not to worry about tomorrow.

John Chrysostom, *The Gospel of Matthew, Homily 19.5*

The citizen of the kingdom calls on their sovereign King for their provision because they acknowledge He alone is able to. The provision the people receive is more than literal bread but everything having to do with their physical existence. It is a petition to the King not that they would have all provision (food, clothing and shelter) fall from the heaven as in Exodus, but that God would bless their works and efforts.

God has cursed the earth as a result of Adam's sin, the consequence to Adam's progeny is hard work that may not always be fruitful. The prayer is for God to be gracious and merciful and bless the work of men.

[...] The prayer also demonstrates the body as a useful part of man, who is both soul and body. The body is not to be thought of as pagans did, something to escape from.

The body is to be for the glory of the Lord. This petition reminds the worshipper that God does care about the body and not only the soul (a louder support to this point would be the bodily resurrection of Jesus and his people).

Nil Nisi Verum , *Exegesis of The Lord's Prayer* Matthew 6.9-13

In making this fourth petition, we are thinking primarily of our needs in this present life. The importance of this petition is that it declares that the material things we need in our lives are good and lawful. It gives a deep religious dimension to the support of life: what Christ's disciple obtains through his own work is also something for which he should implore God—and he should receive it gratefully as a gift from God. God is our support in life: by asking God to support him and by realizing that it is God who is providing this support, the Christian avoids being worried about material needs. Jesus does not want us to pray for wealth or to be attached to material things, but to seek and make sober use of what meets our needs. Hence, in Matthew as well as in Luke (Lk 11:2), there is reference to having enough food for every day. This fourth petition, then, has to do with moderate use of food and material things—far from the extremes of opulence and misery, as God already taught in the Old Testament: “Give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food which is needful for me, lest I be full, and deny thee, and say, ‘Who is the Lord?’ or lest I be poor, and steal, and profane the name of my God” (Prov 30:8).

Navarre Bible on Matthew 6.11

In the second half of the Lord's Prayer, “us”, “our” and “we” are as prominent as the “yours” were in the first half. Where the theological concerns of the First Table of the Lord's Prayer are principal, the human concerns of the Second Table will never be peripheral. [...] Jesus is not satisfied when we pray only for the most important things: God's honor, rule, and will. He gives equal time to human matters. That Jesus gives a Second Table to the Lord's Prayer at all teaches that it is not selfish to pray about physical, social and personal needs. It is in fact Jesus' command that we pray for these things. [...]

The prayer for bread in this petition should be allowed to remain, first of all, a prayer for bread. At times in the church's exposition this bread has been turned into spiritual bread (cf. the Vulgate's panem supersubstantialem with Augustine [...] and Jerome [...] who believe that we are praying especially for him who says, “I am the living Bread”. [...] It is possible to be more spiritual than God. Why should the Jesus who fed his five thousand not want us to pray for the feeding of our six billion? And while Jesus says that man does not live by bread alone, he is too realistic to say that man does not live by bread at all. [Here] in the Fourth petition we pray first for physical bread for physical people. [...]

Thus, as Luther especially taught, *SM*, 147, we pray for bread we are praying at the same time for “everything necessary for the preservation of life, like food, a healthy

body, good weather, house, home, wife, children, good government, and peace - and that God may preserve us from all sorts of calamities, sickness, pestilence, hard times, war, revolution, and the like."

The Fourth Petition is the politico-economic petition. We are not told to pray for daily cake. We may be grateful, of course, when cake is given. But we may only legitimately pray for bread, that is, for necessities. [...]

Are we in fact praying for our "daily" bread or for bread "for the coming day"? [The two may almost be the same if the prayer is prayed in the morning. Prayer this morning for the coming day's bread seems responsible and implies that we are not asking at the last minute for a goose to be dropped in our mouth (in Luther's colorful expression). [...]

We are taught to pray "give us this day" our bread, putting an urgency into the prayer and a day-by-dayness into our economic dependence on God. Those of us who have never gone hungry learn here how much we have to be grateful for. Thus we will rarely be able to pray this petition without saying immediately, "Thank you very much." At the same time few of us in the West can pray this prayer without guilt for being able to enjoy bread abundantly while such a large number in the world lives miserably. Hence this petition causes us also to pray "I am very sorry," and "Please show us what to do," and "Please help all those who bring bread to the world." This petition forms a thorn in the flesh for its comfortable petitioners. [...]

We live in "the Time of the Fourth Petition," for there are so many hungry people in the world. Where the first three petitions are prayed seriously, mission goes forward vigorously, and the Fourth Petition is already partly answered. For the most socially significant event in the world is gospel preaching. The gospel included socio-economic prayers like this. Gospel preaching is unfaithful when it fails to include a lively concern that there be bread. The Fourth Petition, then, is the prayer for social justice.

The petition for bread precedes the petition for forgiveness. Persons can stand up only when their stomachs have enough bread. They can stand up straight only when they have been forgiven their sins. Thus the Christian Church has never been able to live with a good conscience when she has not prayed and worked for bread in the world.

Frederik Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary. Volume 1 The Christbook, Matthew 1-12* (Eerdmans 1987) pp. 305-308

3 Christ the Bread of Life, and Eucharist

As the prayer goes forward, we ask and say, "Give us this day our daily bread." And this may be understood both spiritually and literally, because either way of understanding it is rich in divine usefulness to our salvation. For Christ is the bread of life; and this bread does not belong to all men, but it is ours. And according as we say, "Our Father," because He is the Father of those who understand and believe; so also we call it "our bread," because Christ is the bread of those who are in union with His

body. And we ask that this bread should be given to us daily, that we who are in Christ, and daily receive the Eucharist for the food of salvation, may not, by the interposition of some heinous sin, by being prevented, as withheld and not communicating, from partaking of the heavenly bread, be separated from Christ's body, as He Himself predicts, and warns, "I am the bread of life which came down from heaven. If any man eat of my bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread which I will give is my flesh, for the life of the world."

St Cyprian, *On the Lord's Prayer* 18

"Kingdom bread" is the really the Bread of Life, which Jesus said truly satisfies our inner hunger. As we seek first His Kingdom ("Thy Kingdom come") and His Righteousness ("Thy will be done"), we are assured that the needs for this day of kingdom life will indeed be met ([Matthew 6:33-34](#)).

The Lord's Prayer in Hebrew - Part 3

The translation of the word that gives us "daily" is misleading. The original word in Greek is one that seems to have been coined specifically for this prayer, this Scripture. It is not found in other literature of the period. It means "above the essence" or "supersubstantial" in the Greek. As my study bible puts it, it's not just "bread for this day, taken for sustenance of life," but "bread for the eternal day of the Kingdom of God, for sustenance of our immortal life." It is a picture of the Eucharist, and of all that "feeds us" for membership in this Kingdom.

Daily Exegesis/ Our Father in heaven - the Lord's Prayer/ Bible Commentary on Daily Readings

Etymologically *epiousios* seems to be related to the Greek words *epi*, meaning *on, over, at, against* and *ousia*, meaning *substance*. It is translated as *supersubstantialem* in the Vulgate [...] and accordingly as *supersubstantial* in the Douay-Rheims Bible. [...] Some modern Protestant scholars tend to reject this connection on the presumption that Eucharistic practice and the doctrine of transubstantiation both developed later than this writing.

Epiousios can also be understood as *existence*, i.e., bread that was *fundamental to survival* as in the Syriac Peshitta, where the line is translated "give us the bread of which we have need today". However, scholars of linguistics consider this rendering unlikely since it would violate standard rules of word formation. Koine Greek had several far more common terms for the same idea. Some interpret *epiousios* as meaning *for tomorrow*. [...] The common translation as "daily" is conveniently close in meaning to the other two possibilities as well. Those Christians who read the Lord's Prayer as eschatological view *epiousios* as referring to the second coming—reading for tomorrow (and bread) in a metaphorical sense. Most scholars disagree, particularly since Jesus is portrayed throughout Luke and Matthew as caring for everyday needs for his followers, particularly in the bread-related miracles that are recounted.

Lord's Prayer - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

We should rather understand “give us this day our daily bread” in a spiritual sense. For Christ is “our bread”, because Christ is life, and the life is bread. “I am”, he said, “the bread of life”. Shortly before this he said: “The bread is the word of the living God who has come down from heaven.” Then, because his body is considered to be in the bread, he said, “This is my body”. When we ask for daily bread, we are asking to live forever in Christ and to be inseparably united with his body.

Tertullian, *On Prayer* 6

Since some understand from this that we are commanded to pray for material bread, it will be well to refute their error here and to establish the truth about the epiousios (supersubstantial) bread. We must ask them how it could be that he who commanded us to ask for great and heavenly favors should command us to intercede with the Father for what is small and of the earth. [...] For the bread that is given to our flesh is neither heavenly nor is the request for it a great request.

We, on our part, following the Master himself who teaches us about the bread, shall treat the matter explicitly. [...] “Labor not for the meat that perished but for that which endures to life everlasting, which the Son of Man will give you.” [...] The true bread is that which nourishes the true humanity, the person created after the image of God.

Origin, *On Prayer* 27

The Fathers of the Church interpreted the bread asked for here not only as material food but also as referring to the Blessed Eucharist, without which our spirit cannot stay alive.

According to the *St Pius V Catechism* (cf. 4, 13, 21) the Eucharist is called our daily bread because it is offered daily to God in the Mass and because we should worthily receive it, every day if possible, as St Ambrose advises: “If the bread is daily, why do you take it only once a year [...]? Receive daily what is of benefit to you daily! So live that you may deserve to receive it daily!” (*De Sacramentis*, 5, 4).

Navarre Bible on *Matthew* 6.11

4 Anything that builds us up

There remain now the petitions for this life of our pilgrimage; therefore follows, “Give us this day our daily bread.” Give us eternal things, give us things temporal. Thou hast promised a kingdom, deny us not the means of subsistence. Thou wilt give everlasting glory with Thyself hereafter, give us in this earth temporal support. Therefore is it “day by day,” and “today” - that is, in this present time. For when this life shall have passed away shall we ask for daily bread then? For then it will not be called “day by day,” but “today.” Now it is called “day by day” when one day passes away and another day succeeds. Will it be called “day by day” when there will be one eternal day? This petition for daily bread is doubtless to be understood in two ways, both for the necessary supply of our bodily food and for the necessities of our spiritual support. There is a necessary supply of bodily food for the preservation of our daily life, without

which we can not live. This is food and clothing, but the whole is understood in a part. When we ask for bread we thereby understand all things. There is a spiritual food also which the faithful know; which you too will know when ye shall receive it at the altar of God. This also is "daily bread," necessary only for this life.

Again, what I am handling before you now is "daily bread"; and the daily lessons which you hear in church are daily bread, and the hymns you hear and repeat are daily bread. For all these are necessary in our state of pilgrimage. But when we shall have got to Heaven shall we hear the Word, we who shall see the Word Himself, and hear the Word Himself, and eat and drink Him as the angels do now? Do the angels need books, and interpreters, and readers? Surely not. They read in seeing, for the Truth itself they see and are abundantly satisfied from that fountain from which we obtain some few drops. Therefore, has it been said, touching our daily bread, that this petition is necessary for us in this life.

St Augustine, On the Lord's Prayer

5 This day ... Daily

He said "of the day" to teach us poverty in relation to the things of the world. It is sufficient for only our need, or else when we are anxious for a time, we might withdraw from intimacy with God. This bread of the day indicates necessity. He does not just give us only bread but also clothing and other things, as he said: "Your Father knows what your needs are before you ask him."

Ephrem the Syrian, Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron 6.16A

The appeal, however, is qualified by the need for "this day." The Father's manna is given to us one day at a time. "Each one is to gather as much as he needs... No one is to keep any of it until morning" (*Exodus 16:16,19*). We are to live as the birds of the air or the lilies of the field, taking no thought for the morrow, trusting in God's provision for the needs of our lives.

The Lord's Prayer in Hebrew - Part 3

"Give us this day our supersubstantial bread." Another Evangelist uses the term daily. The first expression indicates that this bread has a noble and substantial character by which its exalted splendour and holiness surpass all substances and creatures. With "daily" the Evangelist shows that without this bread we cannot live a spiritual life for even a day. When he says "this day" he shows that the bread must be eaten each day. It will not be enough to have eaten yesterday unless we eat similarly today. May our daily poverty encourage us to pour out this prayer at all times, for there is no day on which it is unnecessary for us to eat this bread to strengthen the heart of the person within us.

Daily can also be understood as referring to our present life. That is, "give us this bread while we linger in this present world".

"We know that in time to come you will give it to whoever deserves to, but we ask that you give it to us today." He who has not received it in this life will not be able to partake of it in that next life.

John Cassian, *Conference* 9.21

But it may also be thus understood, that we who have renounced the world, and have cast away its riches and pomps in the faith of spiritual grace, should only ask for ourselves food and support, since the Lord instructs us, and says, "Whosoever forsakes not all that he has, cannot be my disciple." But he who has begun to be Christ's disciple, renouncing all things according to the word of his Master, ought to ask for his daily food, and not to extend the desires of his petition to a long period, as the Lord again prescribes, and says, "Take no thought for the morrow, for the morrow itself shall take thought for itself. Sufficient for the day is the evil thereof."

St Cyprian, *On the Lord's Prayer* 19

For daily bread cannot be wanting to the righteous man, since it is written, The Lord will not slay the soul of the righteous by hunger; and again I have been young and now am old, yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging their bread. And the Lord moreover promises and says, Take no thought, saying, "What shall we eat, or what shall we drink, or wherewithal shall we be clothed? For after all these things do the nations seek. And your Father knows that you have need of all these things. Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you." To those who seek God's kingdom and righteousness, He promises that all things shall be added. For since all things are God's, nothing will be wanting to him who possesses God, if God Himself be not wanting to him.

St Cyprian, *On the Lord's Prayer* 21

6 Eschatological bread

Christians remember Jesus' words 'Your heavenly Father knows your needs (food and clothing). Seek first the Kingdom of God and its justice, and everything will be given to you' (Mt 6,32-33). Faith in the generosity of the heavenly Father is a necessary condition. He will provide the necessary sustenance of the entire community.

'The day to come' is 'tomorrow', i.e. the eschatology. Jesus had put his disciples on their guard against worrying about and accumulating goods for oneself; against being apprehensive over the things of this world. 'Do not worry about tomorrow, because tomorrow will have its own problems. Each day has enough troubles of its own' (Mt 6,34).

Christians ask for bread of the eschatological 'tomorrow', of the banquet of the Kingdom of heaven (Lk 14,15). They ask for it today because every earthly reality well-lived is the 'already' of the eschatological era that awaits its total fulfillment.

The Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13)

The prayer for bread, as in “give us today [or, ‘day by day’] our daily bread”, awakens echoes that resound throughout Jesus’ public ministry. The two evangelists who give us the Lord’s Prayer also give us the temptation stories, where Jesus’ hunger and his refusal to create bread for himself feature prominently. The wilderness feeding stories suggest both a literal feeding and a symbolic act that demonstrated God’s power, operative through Jesus, to provide for the needs of the people. Jesus’ own prayers of thanks on these occasions are translated by the Lord’s Prayer into a trustful prayer for God’s regular provision.

One of the most securely established features of Jesus’ public ministry in recent discussion, with only an occasional dissenter (e.g., D. C. Allison Jr., *Jesus of Nazareth*), is his frequent participation in the festive meals of his day, where he celebrated the kingdom with all comers. One does not have to go all the way with the members of the Jesus Seminar, who have described Jesus as “the proverbial party animal,” in order to appreciate that the sharing of food, both actually and symbolically, was a central feature of his life.

The sequence of meals in the story of Jesus reaches its climax, of course, in the Last Supper. The bread there was — again in the context of prayer — given a special meaning, which echoes back throughout Jesus’ lifetime and on to the cross and his resurrection. To pray for bread (whether for “today,” as in Matthew, or for “day by day.” as in Luke), therefore, is once again to align oneself with one of the most central and practical symbols of Jesus’ kingdom work. Bread follows from and symbolizes the kingdom, both in the Lord’s Prayer and in Jesus’ own career. [...]

The prayer for bread has its historical background in the provision of manna in the wilderness. God’s daily gift, following the people’s grumbling, became the stuff of legend. Jesus’ actions in the feeding miracles alluded to the wilderness stories, as the evangelists (especially John) suggest. In the context of the Lord’s Prayer, this clause aligns the followers of Jesus with the wilderness generation and their need to know God’s daily supply of not only literal bread but also of all that it symbolized.

Manna was not needed in Egypt. Nor would it be needed in the promised land. It is the food of inaugurated eschatology, the food that is needed because the kingdom has already broken in and because it is not yet consummated. The daily provision of manna signals that the Exodus has begun, but also that we are not yet living in the land.

NT Wright, *The Lord’s Prayer as a Paradigm of Christian Prayer* (Originally published in *Into God’s Presence: Prayer in the New Testament*, ed. R.L. Longenecker. 2001, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 132-54. Reproduced by permission of the author.)