

The Sermon on the Mount: A Reformed Exposition

Chapter 23: The Lord's Prayer, Part 1

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After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen. For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses (Mt. 6:9-15).

In His continued teaching on prayer, Jesus gives His disciples a model or sample prayer which tells believers the manner, method and even proper content or subject matter for prayer. The word “therefore” connects the prayer to what immediately precedes it and thus this prayer should be viewed as an example of true prayer, given against the vain repetition or mechanical incantations of the heathen. This prayer shows the great attention that Christ paid to this act of piety. He not only told them what not to do and why, but he also told them what needed to be done and gave this model prayer so as to be exceptionally specific. The corruptions regarding prayer among the Jews were so deep and widespread that the Savior gave the church a new directory for prayer. Before we consider the specific aspects and details of this model prayer, there are some preliminary comments that are in order.

First, the Lord's prayer is to be noted for its brevity and simplicity. Unlike hypocritical and heathen prayers which were verbose, unthinking, complicated, empty and mechanical, Jesus' prayer is perfect in every respect. Not one word is wasted. “This delightful prayer is short, devout, and full of meaning.”¹ From this we learn that in our conversation with God our prayers should be concise and simple. Much can be said with few words if our prayer flows from a solid knowledge of Scripture, theology and the meditations of our hearts.

Second, this prayer is for disciples or believers who alone can call God “Father.” This is proven when our Lord contrasts true prayer with hypocritical and pagan prayer and the fact that the term “father” is used in a soteriological or redemptive sense throughout the New Testament when speaking of God. Christ said that those who do not believe in Him are children of the devil, not God (Jn. 8:44; 1 Jn. 3:1, 2). While there is a sense in which God is Father of all as their creator (Mal. 2:10; Ps. 36:6; implied in Ac. 17:28), the Sermon on the Mount is driving home the great antithesis between unbelievers and disciples, or the true children of God. Therefore, the idea that the “Lord's Prayer” is a pluralistic prayer, an ecumenical prayer or a non-Christian prayer because the prayer does not say “in Jesus' name” is erroneous. The sacrificial work of Christ that enables us to call God Father is presupposed in the very first words of the invocation.

Third, the scope and organization of this prayer are amazing. The prayer consists of an invocation, six petitions and a conclusion. Both the invocation (preface to the requests) and the conclusion (according to the Received Text) exalt and glorify God. Our prayers are to begin and

¹ Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 67.

end with the glorification of God. Although prayer is a time to express our needs to God, it is still theocentric and focused on the nature of and cause of God above all else. The first three petitions deal with Jehovah: His name, kingdom and will (vs. 9-10). The second three deal with our own necessities: bread (i.e. our physical needs); debts or sins (i.e. our spiritual needs); and enemies (both spiritual and physical). Like the ten commandments, this prayer focuses our attention upon God before we are concerned with ourselves. “First, God’s concerns will be given priority... (‘Your name..., your kingdom..., your will...’). Secondly, our own needs, though demoted to second place, will yet be comprehensively committed to him (‘Give us..., forgive us..., deliver us...’)”² An understanding of this prayer would dispel the self-centered, self-esteem, prosperity gospel, God-exists-to-meet-my-needs attitude of much of modern evangelicalism. This prayer, in a comprehensive way, deals with God’s glory and His dealings with the whole world, as well as with our own personal lives. “This is indeed the perfect pattern for our prayers!”³

Fourth, the introduction to the Lord’s prayer, “Therefore you are to pray in this manner,” indicates that in the Sermon on the Mount this prayer is a model to be followed and not set forth only as a form to be used. The verb is a present imperative (*proseuchesthe*) and thus indicates that, whenever we pray, this model should guide the outline or structure of our prayers. This means that we do not simply rush into prayer mindlessly, but that contemplation must precede what we say. It may even be a good idea to make an outline of prayer at first and make some notes so that we faithfully follow our Lord’s pattern. As we use this pattern every day we will become better at prayer and the good model that Jesus gave us will become habitual. Although we can never exceed this perfect prayer, we can learn to flesh it out so that it accords with our spiritual needs and unique situation.

Never forget that there are some great advantages in following our Savior’s example. (1) If we model our prayers on this prayer we will avoid errors in the way we pray. In fact, if we are careful to follow Jesus’ inspired example it will be difficult to make mistakes. (2) Another great advantage is that it gives us the proper priority and balance in prayer. Prayer must glorify God and focus on Him before it regards our own needs. Much prayer today is lopsided and anthropocentric. Many evangelicals speak and pray as if God exists to serve us instead of the other way around. This model teaches us that Christian prayer is not simply a list of our own needs and desires. Biblical prayer is much broader than ourselves and takes into account God’s character, His overall plan of redemption in the world and His will. (3) Following the Savior’s model prayer will make our prayers more effective: “If we ask anything according to His will, He hears us” (1 Jn. 5:14). Obviously, the best way to pray according to His will is to follow the pattern that He Himself gave us.

That this prayer can also be used as a set prayer in public or private worship is deduced from the giving of an almost identical prayer on a completely different occasion where our Lord says, “When you pray, say” (Lk. 11:2). The earliest surviving post-apostolic church manual or directory of public worship, the *Didache* (*The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*) dated around the end of the first century (usually A.D. 110) says that Christians should recite the Lord’s prayer three times a day. Although Calvin did not interpret Luke’s account as a command to use “a

² John R. W. Stott, *Christian Counter Culture*, 146.

³ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 326.

prepared form of words,”⁴ he did use a long paraphrase of the Lord’s prayer in the liturgy of the communion service.⁵

Fifth, the second example of this prayer with some minor differences indicates that the Lord’s prayer is the supreme example of how to pray given in the New Testament. In Matthew’s account, the prayer comes in the midst of admonitions regarding the proper way to do acts of Christian piety. In Luke’s gospel, the prayer comes at a later time in Jesus’ ministry. It comes in response to a direct question of one of the disciples” (Lk. 11:1). Christ’s answer to this request is essentially the Lord’s prayer. The differences are minor and indicate that the Savior Himself followed the pattern with some variations on different occasions.

In Luke’s version, the invocation is simply “Father” instead of “Our Father which art in heaven” (Mt. 6:9). The petition “thy will be done...” is omitted. Instead of “this day our daily bread,” it says “each day.” The words “debts” is replaced by the word “sins.” The conclusion, “For Yours is the kingdom and power and glory...,” is also omitted. It is also lacking in Matthew’s version in some of the most ancient manuscripts. Unfortunately most translations (NIV, RSV, JB, NASB have it in brackets indicating it does not belong) also omit the conclusion to the Lord’s prayer in Matthew. They do this on the basis of modern textual criticism. Virtually all modern commentaries follow suit. This omission is rather absurd when we consider that the authors of the *Didache* (c. A.D. 110) who printed Matthew’s version of this prayer had the doxology, “For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory.” Thus, the church, only a few years after the death of John, concurred with what would be the majority and received texts of Scripture.

Sixth, as we study this prayer, we must continually remind ourselves of the importance of this means of grace. “Prayer is beyond question the highest activity of the human soul. Man is at his greatest and highest when, upon his knees, he comes face to face with God.”⁶ Man was created to walk and talk with God in the garden. Christ has redeemed fallen sinners to restore this

⁴ John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:316.

⁵ See William D. Maxwell, *An Outline of Christian Worship* (London: Oxford University Press, 1988), 114ff. Although the Lord’s prayer can be used as a set form of prayer and was from the beginning, we must beware of the cold formalism of the use of set prayers among Romanists and high church Anglicans. Herman Witsius writes, “Neither God, nor Christ, nor his Apostles, ever prescribed a stated liturgy; not in the most ancient church, since the days of the Apostles, was there ever any liturgy in universal use. This is evident from what Justin says, in his Apology addressed to the Emperor Antoninus: *The pastor offers up prayers and thanksgivings to the best of his ability*. A similar proof is found in Tertullian’s Apology: *Christians pray with outspread, because clean hands; with uncovered head, because we are not ashamed, and without the aid of a prompter, because we pray from the heart*.

When piety declined and sloth increased, when heresy and ignorance grew to a shameful height, the first steps began to be taken towards a fixed liturgy. The earliest traces of it, so far as we can perceive, appear in the council held at Laodicea, A.D. 364, the eighteenth canon of which contains a decree, *On the necessity of employing the same liturgy of prayers on all occasions, both in the afternoon and evening prayers*. Shortly afterwards, private Christians were forbidden to use their own prayers till they had taken advice from the better informed. ‘If any one,’ says the Council held at Carthage, CCCXCVII., ‘shall draw up prayers for his own use, let him not use them till he has conferred with his better instructed brethren.’ But they went still farther, and thought proper to prohibit the use of all prayers not authorized by the Synod, as appears from the following enactment of the Council of Mela, CCCCXVI. Can.XII. ‘It is also enacted, that prayers or invocations, or impositions of hands, which have been approved by the Council, may be observed by all, and that no prayers, which have not been authorized by well informed persons, or approved by the Synods, shall be used in the church, lest, through ignorance or carelessness, anything contrary to the faith should be received into such compositions.’ The stupidity of the ministers of that age and country, which occasioned the necessity of such enactments, must have been truly extraordinary” (*The Lord’s Prayer* [Escondido, CA: The den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1994], 145-146).

⁶ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 45.

blessed fellowship between God and man. When a Christian speaks to God, he has a foretaste of heaven. A study of church history reveals that the greatest of saints spent a good deal of time in prayer and relished this special time with God. If we are to be holy and serious about our walk with Christ, then we must be diligent about spending time with God. We should even view prayer, to an extent, as a barometer of our walk with God. Prayer can be difficult and many Christians do not know how to pray; so our loving Savior says, “Here is how to pray. Pray like this.” The Shepherd of our souls guides us in this crucial area to commune with us and bless us.

The Invocation or Words of Address

The Lord’s prayer begins with a direct address to God: “Our Father which art in heaven.” Christian prayer is by nature deeply theological. It begins with an acknowledgment of the only true God and our relationship to Him. Regarding this address, we should note the following.

First, the word “our” indicates that we pray not simply as saved individuals, but as part of the body of Christ. Because we are in the Beloved, we are members of one another who live in fellowship with one another. Thus, when we pray, we acknowledge that He is not only my Father, but also the Father of every believer. The word “our” assumes that even when we pray in secret, intercession for other Christians is included. This word “our” indicates a covenantal relationship and rules out the idea common among liberals and Unitarians that Jesus is referring only to the Fatherhood of God over all men by virtue of creation. When God is represented as the Father in a salvific sense, then we understand that these words speak of a deep love of God for His people—a love greater than a mother has for her only child. Thus, these opening words are great words of faith that presuppose that God sent His only begotten Son and that God has a special saving interest in His people. “You, God, are my loving Father who saved me and sanctified me and you are well pleased to bless your children and answer their petitions.” “Father denotes reverence: Our Father, denotes faith. In all our prayers to God we should exercise faith. Faith baptizes prayer, and gives it a name; it is called ‘the prayer of faith.’ James v 15. Without faith, it is speaking not praying.... Prayer is the key of heaven, faith is the hand that turns it. Pray in faith, ‘Our Father.’ Faith must take prayer by the hand, or there is no coming nigh to God.”⁷ These words of faith are also words of praise and adoration; with them we praise our Father who is love, holiness and power.

Second, we address God as “Father.” The word “father” (Greek, *pater*; Aramaic, *abba*), when used of God, describes one or all of three truths (1) God is the Father of all men by virtue of creation. “Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us?” (Mal. 2:10). Paul says, “We are also His offspring” (Ac. 17:28). (2) God is our Father by virtue of the covenant relationship that He has established with His people through Christ. Jehovah gave new life to His people Israel when He brought them out of Egypt and delivered them from slavery. “In the Old Testament God was called ‘Father’ only fourteen times, but many of these are very significant passages. His fatherhood was...linked...to the events of salvation history. God showed himself to be a Father to Israel by acts of saving power in history.”⁸ (3) God is our Father by virtue of our regeneration in Christ and adoption into His spiritual family. “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has

⁷ Thomas Watson, *The Lord’s Prayer* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1692] 1960, 65), 32.

⁸ Jan Millie Lochman, *The Lord’s Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 1990), 17.

sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out ‘Abba, Father!’ Therefore you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ” (Gal. 4:4-7).

By praying to God as Father, we remind ourselves and Him of the tender loving relationship that we have because of Jesus. The Redeemer has expiated our sins, propitiated God’s wrath, reconciled us to Him and made us sons. God is not some impersonal or disinterested deity, but has a special love for us as dear children. Because of Christ, God delights in us. The word “Father” is a two-sided term of endearment rooted in the cross at Calvary.

When we pray, we must not only believe that God exists, but we must also have faith in Jehovah’s attributes. We address God according to His nature. He is our Father because of His love, compassion and mercy toward us. His love was an infinite love that sent His only begotten Son to the cross. “[W]e should approach him with a mingled sentiment of veneration and love, awe and confidence, in the full assured belief, that he is both able and willing to answer the prayers we present to him.”⁹ God is eager and happy to help us. God has sealed this special affection and intimacy by sending the Spirit of His Son into our hearts (Gal. 4:6); by making us “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet. 1:4).

The word “Father” is important because it also reminds us that, as a father, God will continually pity us, even in our weaknesses and infirmities. “As a father pities his children, so the LORD pities those who fear Him. For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust” (Ps. 103:14). This point is brought out beautifully in Jeremiah 31:20 where Jehovah replies to the repentance of a remnant of Ephraim. “Is Ephraim My dear son? Is he a pleasant child? For though I spoke against him, I earnestly remember him still; therefore My heart yearns for him; I will surely have mercy on him, says the LORD.” Although we are justified by Christ, we are still sinners who continually fall short of God’s standard. Therefore, as we fight against our flesh and worldly lusts, God will not abandon us. And if we do fall into scandalous sin, God will cause us to repent and will spare us (Mal. 3:17). “When we come repenting of our sins, we must eye God as a Father, as the prodigal did (Luke xv.18, Jer. iii.19); when we come begging for grace, and peace, and the inheritance and blessing of sons, it is an encouragement that we come to God, not as an unreconciled, avenging Judge, but as a loving, gracious, reconciled Father in Christ, Jer. iii.4.”¹⁰

Since God is our Father, we will love to be near Him and to commune with Him in prayer. True believers love to get as near to God as they can. In the preached Word they draw close to His voice; in the holy supper they sit at His table and feast upon Him spiritually. “A child of God delights to be in his Father’s presence; he cannot stay away long from God; he sees a Sabbath-day approaching, and rejoices; his heart has been often melted and quickened in an ordinance; he has tasted that the Lord is good, therefore he loves to be in his Father’s presence; he cannot keep away long from God. Such as care not for ordinances cannot say, ‘Our Father which art in heaven.’ Is God the Father of those who cannot endure to be in his presence?”¹¹

The biblical practice of addressing God as Father often raises a question: why are we enjoined by Scripture to address God the Father in prayer instead of Jesus or the Holy Spirit? The answer to this question lies in the fact that when we address the first person of the Godhead, we do also invoke at the same time the Son and the Holy Spirit who are one in nature or essence with the Father and are honored when He is honored (Jn. 5:23). “In the economy of grace the Father is represented to us under that character in which we ought to address him in our prayers,

⁹ John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 1:240-241.

¹⁰ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:73.

¹¹ Thomas Watson, *The Lord’s Prayer* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1692] 1965), 13.

as sustaining the power and majesty of the Godhead, and as originating and bestowing all saving benefits; the Son, as opening up our way to the Father, and providing for us opportunities of approach by his merits and intercession; and the Spirit, as forming within us our prayers and groans. And this is the reason why most frequently, and indeed almost always, in Scripture, we find worship addressed to the Father; rarely to the Son; very rarely to the Holy Spirit.”¹²

The fact that we are commanded to pray to God the Father rules out the common practice of Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox practitioners of praying to Mary and the saints. Prayer to God by millions of believers assumes God’s omniscience, omnipotence and the fact that God alone is the source of all goodness. The idea that Mary and the saints can act as mediators between God and man or that they have the ability to receive and comprehend all these millions of prayers in different languages is nothing but sheer idolatry. Jesus’ rebuke of Satan applies to all such deluded souls: “You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve” (Mt. 4:10). Only God has a perfect knowledge of all our necessities and only Jesus Christ can intercede between God and man. “For there is one God and one Mediator between God and man, the Man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5).

Third, we acknowledge that our Father is in heaven. Although, the Bible is quite clear that God is present everywhere, He is in heaven in a special way. Heaven is where He manifests His glory and places His throne. “The LORD has established His throne in heaven, and His kingdom rules over all” (Ps. 103:19). There are a number of reasons why heaven is an important part of this invocation.

(1) As the term “Father” gives us faith in the work of Christ and God’s love toward us, the expression “in heaven” points us to God’s boundless power. “When the Scripture says, that God is *in heaven*, the meaning is that all things are subject to his dominion,—that the world, and everything in it, is held by his hand,—that his power is everywhere diffused,—that all things are arranged by his providence.”¹³ Thus the psalmist says, “He who sits in the heavens shall laugh.... He shall speak to them in His wrath” (Ps. 2:4, 5). “But our God is in heaven; He does whatever He pleases” (Ps. 115:2). “The biblical term ‘heaven’ expresses the absolute superiority of God to all visible and palpable reality, especially to our own reality and to the reality that we can grasp. Along the lines of Ephesians 3:15 and 4:6, we are to think of the sovereignty of God over all created things (over *panta* and *panter*). But we are able to think of what results from this sovereignty, of his creative and liberating nearness to all, especially to believers.”¹⁴

Believers pray to our Father in heaven, for Christ our Mediator dwells there at God’s right hand (Ps. 110:1, 5; Ac. 2:3-34; Rom. 8:34; Eph. 1:20; Col. 3:1; Heb. 1:3, 13; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2; 1 Pet. 3:22). Thus, the great throne of power is also a throne of grace. Because God is our Father, we may approach Him with boldness. But, since He dwells in heaven we must come to Him with reverence (Eccl. 5:2). Since we pray to our God in heaven, our prayers should be heavenly-minded. God and His kingdom must be the axis around which our petitions are focused. Our minds must rise above the things of this world and focus on God’s glory and majesty.

¹² Herman Witsius, *The Lord’s Prayer*, 155.

¹³ John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:317.

¹⁴ John Milic Lochman, *The Lord’s Prayer*, 23.

The First Petition

The first petition is that all men everywhere will sanctify God's name: "Hallowed be Your name" (Mt. 6:9). The verb translated "hallowed be" is *hagistheto* (aorist passive imperative of *hagiazō*: to set apart or sanctify). The related noun of this verb *hagios* carries the idea of separation and purity. When describing men, it is paired with righteous (Mk. 6:20; Ac. 3:14), and blameless (Eph. 1:4; 5:27; Col. 1:22). When the Bible speaks of the holiness of God, it communicates His "otherness," that God is majestic, perfect and incomparable with any of His creatures. "Holiness is not merely one of God's attributes. It represents His essential nature.... Holiness is what makes God who He is."¹⁵ It is an aspect of His sovereignty, power and righteousness. It reveals who He is and His attitude toward all sin and all opposition to His throne. If we could only choose one word to explain the God of Scripture and the purpose of redemption, it would be holiness. Thus, when Isaiah entered the throne room of God, he heard the seraphim cry out: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!" (6:3).

The expression "Your name" refers to God Himself. In Hebraic thought, there is a special correspondence between the name of a person or thing and the person or thing itself. The name was not simply a word arbitrarily attached to a person, but was designed to express something about the nature of that person. This is especially true of God who names Himself and who reveals Himself in all His works. Thus, in the Bible, the "name of God is virtually indistinguishable from the person of God (cf. for example, Mal. 1:6; Isa. 29:23; Ezek. 36:23; John 12:28; 17:6). Consequently, to set apart or sanctify God's name simply means to sanctify God or regard Him as infinitely holy. With all this in mind there are a number of things to note regarding the first petition.

(1) Petitioning God in prayer must begin with recognition that God is God; that because He is infinitely holy, He should be honored and sanctified by us and all men. Because God is who He is, we want His name to be exalted, glorified and revered by everyone. Thus, prayer begins with the praise and the adoration that God deserves. When we speak of sanctifying or glorifying God's name, we do not mean that an increase of holiness or glory can or will occur in God Himself, for that is impossible. God remains God no matter what we say or do. The imperative is directed to what men need to do. Most men reject God and His Word and thus embrace various idols. Therefore, they do not revere, honor or glorify God as they should. Professing Christians, by their speech and behavior, also do not always render to God the honor that He deserves. Consequently, men need to set God apart from everything common and profane. They need to adore, revere, honor, prize, and esteem God above all things. In this sense, the first petition corresponds to the first and third commandments. This petition expresses a regenerated heart's desire to see God truly honored as Jehovah in our wicked world. It also expresses "an eschatological longing for the day when all men acknowledge God as the Lord."¹⁶ Do your prayers begin with an expressed longing to see the whole world bow before Jehovah and acknowledge Him to be infinite in holiness?

(2) This petition teaches us that God's honor and glory are always the first concern of prayer. It gives us a proper perspective on our whole lives—that our chief aim is the exaltation of God. Thus, we must view this request as foundational to all that follows. All of our desires, actions and petitions must be subordinate to this one. Thus, we pray, "Father, give me sustenance

¹⁵ A. S. Wood, "Holiness" in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 3:175.

¹⁶ R. T. France, *Matthew*, 134.

so that I may serve and glorify You. Lord, expand Your kingdom so that You will be exalted.” Earlier, we saw how the Pharisees’ prayer was motivated by and rooted in self-glorification. Here Jesus directs us, even in the content of our prayers, to make the exaltation of the name of God our chief end. This is certainly the pattern that our Savior followed who said, “Father, glorify Your name” (Jn. 12:28) and “Father, the hour has come. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son also may glorify You” (Jn. 17:1-2).

If this crucial aspect of prayer was understood and practiced in the professing Christian community, then the whole modern hedonistic view of prayer as a key to health, wealth, self-esteem and success would be abandoned forever. Our prayers would focus on moving our own hearts to sing God’s praises; on regulating our whole lives by the Holy Spirit to promote the glory of God; on enlightening our minds to see and understand God’s perfections; on a sincere desire to seek God’s glory among the heathen. Humanism would be cast out of the church, root and branch.

The Second Petition

In the second petition, we pray for the coming of the kingdom of God: “Thy kingdom come” (Mt. 6:10). This petition logically follows upon the first, for God’s name will not be sanctified throughout the whole world as it should until the kingship of Christ is acknowledged. To understand this petition, we must answer a few crucial questions.

First, what is meant by the kingdom of God? The broad definition of God’s kingdom simply refers to His sovereign rule over everything in both the spiritual and physical realms. “God is the King of all the earth.... God reigns over the nations; God sits on His holy throne” (Ps. 47:7-8). “The LORD reigns, He is clothed with majesty.... Your throne is established from of old; You are from everlasting” (Ps. 93:1, 2). When we speak of God’s reign in this sense, it cannot increase or decrease, for it is based on God’s nature and character. Therefore, God’s kingdom in this sense cannot “come.”

Consequently, the second petition deals with the salvific kingdom, or kingdom of grace, established by the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Although there is indeed a sense in which the Savior’s kingdom reaches back in time and encompasses the whole Old Testament people of God, the focus of this petition is on the work of the gospel in the whole New Covenant era, climaxing in the second coming of Christ and the consummate kingdom. “The gospel is itself, above all, the announcement that God’s promised rule has now begun in and through the work of Jesus the Messiah...so the disciples are thus encouraged to pray that what was begun in the ministry of Jesus, what they have now begun to participate in, may be experienced in all its fullness.”¹⁷

The Old Testament contained many great promises regarding the victory of the Messiah’s Kingdom. These prophecies were unfortunately grossly misunderstood by the Jews and, thus, they expected the Messiah to almost instantaneously deliver a full blown kingdom of peace, prosperity and deliverance.

The kingdom of grace that Jesus brings in is very different. It has three aspects that are important to understand for our prayers.

(1) The kingdom is definitive in the sense that our Lord’s redemptive work has already merited a complete victory. Salvation, in the fullest sense of that term, has already been

¹⁷ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-3*, 148.

accomplished and guaranteed by the bloody cross and empty tomb. The Savior's sacrificial death and glorious resurrection is complete, perfect, sufficient; therefore, as the *foundation* of a world-wide kingdom victory is not dependent on man's cooperation for ultimate success. Nothing can be added to what Christ has done. Thus, we can speak of the kingdom coming in the past tense. Consequently, in the book of Revelation, the kingdom is described as having already arrived: "So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him. Then I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, 'Now salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of His Christ have come'" (12:9-10). "The victory over the Dragon, according to St. John, does not take place by means of a cataclysmic event at the end of history, but by means of *the* cataclysmic event that took place in the middle of history: the sacrifice of the Lamb."¹⁸ Thus when we pray for the kingdom to come in history, we can pray with hope and a full assurance of faith.

(2) The kingdom is also progressive and grows throughout history. It starts out like a mustard seed and grows into a great tree (Mt. 13:31ff). It began at Jerusalem and is spreading to the very ends of the earth. This is one reason that praying for the coming of the kingdom must accompany preaching the gospel and discipling the nations. The church is involved in fighting the kingdom of darkness by letting her light shine before men and imploring men to bow the knee to the King of kings.

(3) The kingdom is eschatological, or future, because complete victory in time, on this earth, does not occur until the second coming of Christ when all opposition to His throne is forever crushed and all the forces of darkness, whether spirit beings or men, are cast into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:13-15).

Second, how does this kingdom of grace come? It comes throughout history by the preaching of the gospel attended by the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit; the discipling of the nations by the church teaching the whole counsel of God; and, the progressive sanctification of individuals and societies by the Holy Spirit. This kingdom is furthered and strengthened by Messiah the King's judging and subduing the enemies of God and His people throughout history. Therefore, when we pray for furtherance of Christ's kingdom we pray for the following things.

(1) We pray that sin and iniquity would be subdued and replaced by godly behavior in our own lives. We petition God to enlighten our minds to any violations of His Word in thought, word or deed; to convict us of the heinous nature of these sins in God's sight; to confess these sins to God and sincerely repent of them. The kingdom of God must begin with us, with putting off the deeds of darkness and replacing them with habitual acts of righteousness. This must occur if our light is to shine before men. "[W]hen grace comes, there is a kingly government set up in the soul. Grace rules the will and affections, and brings the whole man in subjection to Christ; it kings it in the soul, sways the scepter, subdues mutinous lusts, and keeps the soul in a spiritual decorum."¹⁹

(2) We pray that the church of Christ would progressively be sanctified and that the church will always be reforming instead of declining spiritually. This point is important, for if the church has lost its saltiness, then how will pagan culture be transformed? The visible church is the means that God has set up to advance the cause of His kingdom in this world. If the church becomes corrupt in worship, doctrine or discipline, then it cannot be a city set on a hill; it is good for nothing. A church that imitates this world and then virtually becomes like this world ceases

¹⁸ David Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance* (Ft. Worth, TX: Dominion Press, 1987), 315-316.

¹⁹ Thomas Watson, *The Lord's Prayer*, 62.

to be a true church; it becomes a synagogue of Satan. Thus, there must be continual prayer for reformation and revival in Zion. If there is one step back because of sin and declension, we pray for at least two steps forward. We pray that God would raise up men who are like Martin Luther, John Calvin or John Knox to challenge sin and declension in the church and that their work would be attended by the power of the Holy Spirit.

(3) We pray for the success of the gospel. This involves systematic prayer for Reformed missionaries and church planters. This also involves praying for particular people to be saved by Christ: relatives, acquaintances and even enemies. We pray that evangelism and missionary work will be so successful that the majority of people in each nation will embrace the Savior and submit to His Word. We even pray that all the nations of this earth will bow the knee to Jesus, covenant with Him and adopt biblical Christianity as the established religion of each nation. We can pray this prayer with hope and faith, for God has promised such a time of gospel victory before the second coming in time and on earth. “For from the rising of the sun, even to its going down, My name shall be great among the Gentiles; in every place incense shall be offered to My name, and a pure offering; for My name shall be great among the nations, says the LORD of hosts” (Mal. 1:11). “Nations whom You have made shall come and worship before You, O Lord, and shall glorify Your name” (Ps. 96:9; cf. Ps. 22:27-28; 72:8-11; Isa. 2:2-3; 42:1-4). “What God has promised we must pray for; for promises are given, not to supersede, but to quicken and encourage prayer.”²⁰ Let us pray that: the Messiah’s kingdom will flourish; that the whole earth will be covered with the true Christian religion as the waters cover the seas (cf. Isa. 11:9); and, the glorious gospel will transform multitudes of blasphemers into true worshipers who will glorify God in Spirit and in truth (Jn. 4:23-24).

(4) We pray for the overthrow of all the forces of darkness by the preaching of the gospel and by Messiah’s acts of judgment in history. We must daily petition God to conquer by the sword of the Spirit, so that secular humanism in all its forms, as well as popery, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and the like, would be destroyed and swept off the face of the earth. It is sad to think that, though the devil’s kingdom is so wicked, yet it should have multitudes to support it. At the present time Satan has many more that work for his kingdom than Jesus has for His. Satan gathers in a large harvest of souls. He even has much of professing Christendom in his grasp. But, we know that he is already a defeated foe and that it is only a matter of time before his hellish kingdom is beaten down in history and then is fully destroyed at the second coming. Thus, we pray for Messiah the Prince to rule by His Spirit and His rod of iron. Imprecatory prayers are certainly part of this petition. For the kingdom to advance, persecutors and mortal enemies of the church must be judged and subdued by Christ. “It is a prayer that all atheism, and infidelity, and ignorance, and error, and superstition, and false religion, and impiety, may be banished from the world, and that the only living and true God, ‘our Father in heaven,’ may be worshipped and honoured over all the earth.”²¹

(5) We are to pray for the second *bodily* coming of Jesus, when all the sin and evil in us and the world is routed and removed. This prayer demonstrates our faith that we are “looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God” (2 Pet. 3:12). We pray for the day of the Lord at the end of history, when Jesus will be fully glorified before all men and all opposition crushed forever. “The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’” (Rev. 22:17). “Even so, come, Lord Jesus!” (Rev. 22:20).

²⁰ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:74.

²¹ John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 1:241.

Let us daily approach the throne of grace, hallowing God's name, petitioning our loving Father to bless His church and spread His heavenly kingdom in this earth. "Let us learn to labour fervently in prayer, as Epaphras did, Col. iv.12 and we shall find, it is the hand of diligence in this duty that maketh rich."²²

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²² Matthew Henry, "How to Begin Every Day with God" in *Works*, 1:213.