

Give us today our daily bread

Take a moment to think about how you pray. What was the last thing you prayed about? Was it a prayer for a loved one, that God might help them, or a prayer of thanks for God's aid? Was it a prayer of praise? Or did you just sit with God, thinking about God's goodness? Was it silent prayer, or filled with words? Prayer can – and should – take many forms; but in this forth message on prayer, I'm faced with the fact that often my prayers – and maybe yours too – start and end with asking God for bread, praying for my needs and wants, with little or no time doing anything else.

Asking God for bread is perfectly fine – Jesus is teaching us to do this very thing. But notice it's place... it's not first. In the Lord's Prayer in our order of service, asking for bread is on the sixth line; it's the third phrase after acknowledging God as our Father and hallowing His name, and praying for God's Kingdom to come and will be done.

And yet, this is where we often run to in prayer and stay. And, as Tom Wright suggests in his book, *The Lord and His Prayer*, "The danger with the prayer for bread is that we get there too soon."¹ In getting there too soon we miss – maybe entirely – the true meaning of prayer; for prayer first and foremost is about being with and knowing God. It's about knowing God as our heavenly Father – not our heavenly vending machine.

As Wright says, once again,

"It's tempting to race through the Lord's Prayer, as far as 'on earth as it is in heaven', so that we can then take a deep breath and say, 'Now look here: when it comes to daily bread, there are some things I simply must have.' And then off we go into a shopping list. To do this, of course, is to let greed get in the way of grace."²

How long do we spend in prayer each day, week, month, or even year, simply meditating on the wonderful truth of 'Our Father in heaven.' How often do we thank and praise God that we can call Father; and then letting this truth soak into our hearts and minds – even for a few minutes. Imagine if we spend just a little time each day just letting this truth weave itself into our lives; how would it shape our view of ourselves, each other, and the world?

How often do we spend hallowing God's name, praising God for God's goodness; not just for what God gives us, but who God is. How often do we consider the marvel of creation – the sun, moon, and stars, the oceans, the flowers, and the animals – and then praising God – for as the psalmist says:

*When I look at the night sky and see the work of your fingers –
the moon and the stars you set in place –*

¹ Tom Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1996), 36

² Ibid., 36

*what are mere mortals that you should think about them,
human beings that you should care for them?*³

When do we praise God for God's holiness and justice? And again, how would this transform our thinking and behaviour if we did?

What if we spent time in prayer considering and praying for God's Kingdom to come, and God's will to be done. It might require thoughtful reflection and searching the Scriptures to know God's will ... which would create an impetus for Bible reading. In the Gospels we see Jesus healing the sick, setting the oppressed free, and opening the eyes of the blind; these were signs of God's Kingdom. So, what would it look like to pray for God to heal the sick and set the oppressed free today? And as I've said previously, what would such prayers require of us? How might God *use us* to answer our own prayers?

Prayer is so much more than coming to God with a shopping list of needs, yet sometimes this is exactly how we treat prayer; maybe we do 'let greed get in the way of grace' – even if unintentionally.

All this being said, Jesus *does* invite us to pray "Give us today our daily bread." But what did He *mean* by this?

One of the things Jesus was accused of was of being a 'glutton and a drunkard.'⁴ His opponents accused Him of this not only because He frequently ate with drunk, but because of *who* He ate and drank with – notorious sinners, like tax collectors. But Jesus didn't eat and drink solely for the sake of it, Jesus was enacting God's great banquet, an image steeped in the Old Testament, from the vision of a land flowing with milk and honey,⁵ to the Psalmist saying, "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies";⁶ to the children of Israel being fed with quails and manna in the wilderness; to prophecies such as in Isaiah:

*On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines.
And he will destroy on this mountain
the shroud over all people;
he will swallow up death forever.
He will wipe away the tears from all faces,
and the disgrace of his people
he will take away from all the earth.*⁷

³ Psalm 8:3–4

⁴ Luke 7:34

⁵ Exodus 3:8; Numbers 13:27; Deuteronomy 6:3; Jeremiah 11:5

⁶ Psalm 23:5

⁷ Isaiah 25:6–8

For Israel, God's liberation and freedom was embodied in the idea of a feast. If you think about Israel's most important moment – the Exodus, God's liberation of Israel from Egypt – this was prefaced by Israel celebrating Passover for the first time – by eating and drinking. Judaism's yearly calendar is filled with celebrations and food; of the seven major festivals only the Day of Atonement does not.

As Tom Wright argues,

Jesus' eating and drinking was a sign that God was fulfilling the promise of Isaiah and acting at last to rescue his people and wipe every tear from their eyes. Jesus' parties, and his feeding of his followers in the wilderness, were intended, for those with eyes to see, to pick up this whole theme and celebrate it.⁸

When Jesus invites us to pray "give us this day our daily bread" this is then an extension of the prayer "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." It's a prayer for God's Kingdom to come and God's celebration to begin. But "our daily bread" – our daily needs – are not therefore unimportant, as though God's Kingdom is purely spiritual. The promise of God's kingdom is that sorrow will be no more, and that means the coming of God's kingdom includes the fulfilment of our needs; our needs are not second-rate.⁹

One of the great miracles Jesus performed is the feeding of the five thousand. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, this is preceded by the disciples telling Jesus to send the crowds away.¹⁰ Only in John's gospel is it Jesus who sees the crowds' hunger and need.¹¹

Jesus does not dismiss the needs of their stomach; He provides for them. But Jesus also does not want us to spend all our energy working for "food that perishes."¹² Yet He doesn't make this point by telling the crowd to forget their physical hunger; He provides for them and *then* connects their physical hunger to a deeper spiritual need – their need for the Bread of Life.

According to the apostle Paul, the stories we have in the Old Testament are given to us that we might have hope.¹³ These stories are filled with people who brought their deepest natural longings to God in prayer, and then found God answering their prayers, in ways that weaved their lives into the purposes of God.

⁸ Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer*, 39

⁹ *Ibid.*, 41

¹⁰ Matthew 14:15; Mark 6:35–36; Luke 9:12

¹¹ John 6:5–6

¹² John 6:27

¹³ Romans 15:4

Naomi longed that her daughter-in-law Ruth might have a husband; God, answering that longing, made Ruth the great-grandmother of King David. Hannah longed and prayed for a child; God gave her Samuel, who would become his mouthpiece to Israel.

As Tom Wright says, 'Give us this day our daily bread' reminds us that our natural longings, for bread and all that it symbolizes, are not to be shunned as though they were of themselves evil.

This prayer isn't a prayer for our desires to be taken away, rather it is a prayer that God would satisfy our desires and needs in God's way and in God's time.

And, since God himself is most truly the deepest object of our hunger, this prayer asks that we may be fed with God himself. And there can be no question of God failing to answer that.

But of course, in praying for our daily bread, we cannot forget that there are millions who didn't have bread yesterday, don't have any today, and in human terms are unlikely to have any tomorrow either.

How do we pray this prayer in church, and then go out for morning tea, and home to lunch?

Tom Wright says it well:

Well, obviously, we can give, as best we can. Obviously, we can become more politically sensitive and active, to support programmes not just for foreign aid but for a juster and fairer global economy. This is part of what it means to pray this prayer. But, in addition, we should be praying this prayer not just *for* the hungry, but *with* the hungry, and all who are desperate from whatever deep need. We should see ourselves, as we pray the Lord's Prayer, as part of the wider Christian family, and human family, standing alongside the hungry, and praying, in that sense, on their behalf.¹⁴

As I began today, I said that we sometimes get to "give us our daily bread" too soon – we start by asking God for things. Here, though, as I begin to conclude, we are faced with the equal challenge that we might get here too late. Too late if we don't realise that to pray the Lord's Prayer – and this phrase especially – is to pray a dangerously subversive prayer. Because if we mean this prayer, we cannot mean it solely for ourselves. We cannot pray only for our needs to be met; we must pray it for everyone. And if we truly desire that other people's needs will be met – that others will have their daily bread – then we must be prepared to pray in the very next breath, that God will show us how we can be an answer to this prayer. Amen.

¹⁴ Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer*, 45-46