

The Possibility of Prayer

I'm going to ask all of you the same question I asked the children: What is prayer? Shout out your answers. [Wait for answers]

With the entire Bible as evidence, humans have been praying to God for thousands of years. In one of my biblical Hebrew classes, I learned an ancient Jewish prayer: *Baruch atah, Adonai eloheinu, melech ha olam, ki motzeh lechem min ha aretz*. "Blessed are you, O Lord our God, king of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth." I wonder if Jesus prayed that prayer. Note the significance of bread, and of God as King, two themes we also find in the Lord's Prayer.

It's clear from Luke's gospel that Jesus prayed a lot. Particularly at critical moments of his ministry, like his baptism, and in the garden before his arrest and crucifixion. Sometimes he would spend an entire night in prayer. Often, but not always, he would pray in solitude. Luke says that one time Jesus withdrew a "stone's throw" from his disciples to pray. (I wonder how far Jesus could throw a stone!) Jesus prayed for his disciples by name. He prayed for himself. He even prayed while he was hanging on the cross. At least twice.

One day, while he was on his final journey to Jerusalem, Jesus took some time out to pray. And when he had finished, his disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray. The ensuing verses are like an entire course on prayer, including not just how to pray, but what prayer is, and even who God is. Here are some of the key points from Jesus' course on prayer.

He began by telling his disciples, "When you pray, say: Father." Why "Father?" Why not "Baruch atah, Adonai eloheinu, melech ha olam?" Because "Father" was much more simple and informal. We don't need fancy words to talk to God! Moreover, "Father" was a familial term, implying that we are part of God's family. Sometimes Jesus even used the Aramaic "Abba." This connotes an especially close and tender relationship, like our "Papa" or "Daddy." The point is not that God is male, as opposed to female. The point is that God is very close to us, that God cares for us, like a loving parent. It's hard to get past our patriarchal indoctrination, but we should feel free to also refer to God as "Mother," or mama. God is like both—but ultimately beyond both.

"Father," Jesus began, "hallowed be your name." A more literal translation of the Greek would be, "Father, let your name be made holy." To be holy is to be set apart, lifted up, treated as special. And this petition is in the form of a third-person imperative, a command which is directed both to God and to ourselves. "Father make your name holy." As well as "Father, let me make your name holy." It's even like a promise or pledge: "Father, I will make your name holy."

Next, Jesus says, "Your kingdom come." Another bi-directional, third-person imperative, directed both to God and to ourselves. "God, cause your kingdom to come." And, "God, I want to help your kingdom to come. I will help your kingdom to come."

It occurred to me this past week that Jesus' model prayer focuses both on the big picture and the little picture. "God, may your kingdom come in its fullness someday." And "God, may your kingdom come today," even if only in little ways, perceptible only if we know what we're looking for.

Next comes, “Give us each day our daily bread.” What do you think? Is that big picture or small picture? On one hand, it’s small picture. It takes one day at a time, and it focuses on today, because as Jesus says elsewhere, there’s no point in worrying about tomorrow. Today is enough. Life can only be lived one moment at a time.

But notice that the pronouns are first person plural rather than singular. Not, “give me my daily bread,” but “give us our daily bread.” There is concern for community, perhaps concern even for all the people of the world, with whom, after all, we are in relationship. “Give us all our daily bread.” That is definitely big picture.

The word “bread” could be taken here as a metaphor, not just for food, but for everything we need. Not want, but need. Another translation could be, “Give us today what we need for today.” With the implication that tomorrow I will pray for tomorrow. Tomorrow will take care of itself. Today’s needs are enough. Small picture. Tomorrow is in God’s hands.

Now the next petition: “And forgive us our sins.” Big picture or small picture? It’s a bit of both. The pronouns are again plural rather than singular: not “forgive me my sins” but “forgive us all our sins.” Aldo, the imperative is in the present tense, and could be translated “continue to forgive our sins.” Or to paraphrase, “I know you have already forgiven yesterday’s sins; now, please forgive today’s.” The implicit implication is that, hey, we’re human—we sinned yesterday, and guess what? We’re going to sin today. We need your daily, ongoing forgiveness, God. No less than we need our daily bread. We need your forgiveness to live, to survive, to keep on going.

Next is, “for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.” Forgiveness is like a two-way pipeline. It comes in, and it goes out. Our ability to forgive others is essential to our ability to receive forgiveness from God. We need to practice it. Every day. If our forgiveness gets stuck going out, say, because of some obstruction, God’s forgiveness will certainly get stuck at the same place coming in. God, help us to keep our forgiveness pipelines open and clear of clogs.

“And do not bring us to the time of trial.” Or, as we usually say, “and lead us not into temptation.” Which begs the question, does God cause us to be tempted and tested? Or does God merely allow it to happen? Either way, the Bible is full of examples. God tested Abraham, and Job. God tested the children of Israel in the wilderness. Jesus was tested. So was the Apostle Paul. Seems safe to say that we’re going to be tested too. Whether God causes it, or merely allows it, temptation and trial and testing is an inevitable part of life. So perhaps the real point of this part of the prayer is, God, we’d rather not be tested today, or tomorrow, for that matter. But if and when we are, help us to be strong. Help us to survive. Help us to succeed. And forgive us when I fail.

Jesus’ model prayer, in Luke at least, ends at that point. But not Jesus’ lesson on prayer. He next tells a parable about a friend to whom we go, at midnight, to ask for three loaves of bread, so we can feed our guests. This friend has lots of good reasons to turn us down. It’s late. He is already in bed. Furthermore, it’s a family bed; his children are with him, and they’re fast asleep. Go away, and come back some other, more convenient time.

Except our friend doesn’t turn us away. And neither will God when we come to him in prayer. No matter what time of day or night it is.

God wants us to come to him and her in prayer. God wants us to ask for what we need; because God wants to give us what we need (just like we sang earlier). God wants us to seek, so that God can help us find. God wants us to knock, so that God can be the first one to open the doors wide and welcome us in.

God will never turn us away when we come to him and her in prayer. Like a loving parent who can't help but give us what we need when we ask for it, even more so will God.

The slightly problematic question as to whether God gives us everything for which we ask, to which we can safely say "no" (and believe me, I've tried it), is not part of this lesson. Nor is it the point.

The point is that prayer should be such a regular part of our daily lives that it's practically continuous. It's like a great conversation that never ends. To quote one commentator, "Where we bring our need to God's love in faith, that is prayer."

Amen.