

The Prayer of the Kingdom

Len Hjalmarson



“This, then, is how you should pray:

*“ ‘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.
And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.’*

How many times have I said these words in the last thirty years? There have been times when I have prayed from an open heart, and times when I have prayed because others were praying. At times God and His kingdom have been at the center of my prayer; at other times it has clearly been myself and my own need. Yet I think there is space for both in these words.

In this past week I've been sitting at the feet of Jesus and pondering this short prayer in new ways. In part, this movement is motivated by a new awareness of my need; in part, it is motivated by a growing awareness of God and His kingdom. It seems we travel in circles in the spiritual life, and we pass familiar places-- but they are somehow not familiar. As TS Eliot noted, we come back to the place we started and know it for the first time.

So in one sense this prayer is only a beginning point. But in another sense, we never really leave it. I'm only beginning to know this prayer, and only beginning to pray it. I hope in the end it will be a pattern for me, and an icon - something that points beyond itself to a new place I discover with God. This next week I want to share some simple insight with you every day, and in good style I'll attempt to work systematically, starting today with the opening words: Our Father in heaven, Holy is your Name.

This prayer arrives in Matthew 5-7 as one of three spiritual practices, in between giving to the poor and fasting. And it covers a lot of territory. But it begins where every prayer should begin - addressing our common father. This father is a king; yet we address him with the most intimate of terms: *abba*. So the first thing Jesus does is the thing he was so intent on doing with his disciples all the time - revealing the father, and his heart for us. His heart is tender toward us. He writes our names on his hand.

What we learn is that all true prayer is relational. We have been brought near to the God by the sacrifice of Jesus. No longer distant in His perfection, suddenly he is near to us.

An old Celtic expression captures God's nearness. The old Gaelic translates with this sense: "God's help and care is nearer to us than the door." Even before we wonder about the option, even before we deal with our anxiety about the future, God is near. What does he say as he remembers us? "My beloved..." It isn't easy to hear these words in a world where even relationships which should be intimate are fragmented and broken. Many of us would have loved to hear words of tenderness and care from earthly fathers, and did not. Instead, we carry a sense of loneliness and distance with us, and we struggle with receiving God's approval.

It's helpful to frame our intention as we pray. The movement of prayer is from earth to heaven, and then from heaven to earth. We pray to our father in heaven, to bring change to the earth. We'll talk more about this tomorrow, but in essence prayer is the most fundamental work of the church. It begins with personal intimacy, and then proceeds to outward into the world. In the words of one saint, prayer is "reporting for duty."

The name of our father is a Holy Name. So we have this paradox happening, where we have intimacy with this God who is “wholly other.” There is nothing in this world that is Holy the way that our God is Holy - not until Jesus arrived. And the mystery is that somehow we ourselves partake of this same nature when we become new creatures in Christ. As bearers of the incarnation, we bring the Holy and the not-yet-holy together. All ground we tread is potentially holy ground.

But I’m moving too fast, because our first recognition is that God is Holy. In much of our experience this isn’t so. We hear the name of God profaned, and sometimes for good reason. The Church that should somehow His otherness often represents something completely different. It doesn’t represent the character of Jesus, but instead compromises that character and trades it for something else: a mess of pottage, religious nationalism, the priorities of the Empire, more patterns of oppression.

But Jesus calls us to remember...

*Holy, Holy Holy is the Lord of Hosts.
The whole earth is filled with His glory...*

Somewhere Gerhard Lohfink makes the connection to Ezekiel 36:22-24 where God’s name is made Holy by the gathering of a people. The connection is that as a community - a visible contrast society - we make the glory of God visible on earth. I recall William Cavanaugh’s words: “The church is meant to be that community of people who make salvation visible for the rest of the world. Salvation is not a property of isolated individuals, but is only made visible in mutual love.”¹

It’s easier some days to recognize His glory anywhere but in a religious gathering. It’s easier sometimes to see His glory in the face of a new baby, the beauty of a sunset, an act of kindness. We need to affirm that kind of vision, because we, and the structures we build, are broken. And yet the “whole earth” is filled with His glory. Then we need to find ways to let that light shine through each of us. If our own hearts are cleansed by the work of Jesus, and if we are seeking to “do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God,” if we are daily transformed by Him and walking in the truth, loving our neighbor and caring for the stranger.. then our light will break out like the sun and others will see that His name is Holy.

Part II



The kingdom of God is creation healed.

I don’t recall where I read or heard that, but it remains a powerful summary of kingdom theology.

It’s too easy to see kingdom theology, like other pieces of Second Testament teaching, somehow divorced from the grand flow of the story. Kingdom theology is profoundly anchored in the mighty acts of God on behalf of His people: in the stories, prayers and prophecies of the First Testament. The key words are already familiar and known to us: covenant, land, peace (shalom), creation, people of God, justice, deliverance, sacrifice, atonement.

When we pray “Your kingdom come,” we are asking for God’s rule. He rules in heaven; we ask to see that rule manifest itself in our earthly reality. What does that look like? It looks like food for the hungry, healing for the sick, justice for the oppressed. It looks like fair wages for workers, mercy and care for widows and orphans, truth telling in the media. These things are all good news! It’s not about “church growth,” it’s about the love and power of God transforming human communities.

We know through the parables of Jesus that God’s kingdom is both present, and yet to come. Not everyone we pray for is healed. Not every cause we undertake will see victory. We live in between the times, when the kingdom is at work like leaven in a lump, or like a seed planted in soil. We can observe its effects, and sometimes they are powerful, but often not fully developed.

¹ William Cavanaugh, “The Church as God’s Body Language,” *Zadok Perspectives*, Spring, 2006.

There has been a lot of confusion over the years between the kingdom and the *ekklesia*. Jesus message was the gospel of the kingdom. He didn't come preaching the church. Yet the two are intimately related. In the parable that describes the divine reign the community of the king are children of His reign. The *ekklesia* is the offspring of His rule (Mtt.13), its fruit, both spawned by the rule of God and directed toward it. The *ekklesia* is a sign and a foretaste of God's kingdom; at the same time, she is its agent and instrument.

It's interesting that the fulfillment of this prayer would mean blessing for all, whether they acknowledge God's rule or not. But partial fulfillment would not mean a political change. The expectation of Jesus disciples, like the popular expectation of the day, was for the end of Roman oppression. But this isn't what happens at Jesus ascension. Instead, for the sake of God's mission, we have to embrace a paradox.

Newbigin comments,

—The meaning of this —overlap of the ages in which we live, the time between the coming of Christ and His coming again, is that it is the time given for the witness of the apostolic Church to the ends of the earth. The end of all things, which has been revealed in Christ, is—so to say—held back until witness has been borne to the whole world concerning the judgment and salvation revealed in Christ. The implication of a true eschatological perspective will be missionary obedience, and the eschatology which does not issue in such obedience is a false eschatology.²

The kingdom that Jesus proclaims has a hidden and increasing effect, like leaven in a lump. Like salt, it flavors everything it touches, but it does not automatically transform human systems. The world is real, it offers "resistance to love," as Annie Dillard put it. Sin and the structures of sin remain intact in the world, and we have a real enemy who opposes us until Jesus return.

In this world direct assault tends to perpetuate injustice. As a result, the Kingdom of God works in a way that seems foolish to the wise: where we expect power, the kingdom path often leads through weakness. The Son of God dies the death of a criminal, and wins a great victory. Between the times God's kingdom rule is expressed in weakness and humility.

Interlude



David Bosch

Words move through cycles in syncopation with culture. Change in our way of living requires a shift in meaning, so that the cadences of language occur not only in speech, but in meaning itself.

The most recent shift-- a good one-- is a rediscovery of something more basic than leadership: divine purpose. What is this story we are in? What is God really up to in the world? God is on a mission.

*It is not the Church of God that has a mission in the world,
It is the God of mission who has a Church in the world.*

When Jesus arrived on the scene he arrived among a people who were in exile in their own land. They were oppressed by Roman rule. Their expectation was firmly focused on a political deliverer: a new Moses who would conquer the heathen and set up his rule in Jerusalem.

Even their religious life had become stale and ritualistic. First-century Jews worshiped in the Temple, but they lamented the lack of God's glorious presence. Instead of a living reality, the Temple seemed a place of memory.

² Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978)

When Solomon built the Temple and dedicated it, it was filled with the cloud which veiled God's presence. The priests couldn't stand there, because God's glory filled the whole house. Ezekiel's vision of the restored Temple climaxes in the glory of the Lord returning to the house, sweeping in from the east and illuminating all the earth with its glory. Many, many first-century Jews lamented the fact that this still hadn't happened.

All this changes with Pentecost.

Luke retells the story of the day of Pentecost with the intent of awakening memories of God filling the Temple with his glory. NT Wright comments,

The rushing of a violent wind filled the house where the apostles were sitting, and flaming tongues of fire came to rest on each of them. That phrase is so well known that we lose, perhaps, its immediate and vivid force. Imagine a dragon with a red, fiery tongue reaching out to lick you.

Then imagine that the dragon is just outside the window and as its tongue reaches through it turns into a dozen tongues and everyone in the room is being licked with fire. That's the picture. And Luke, writing the story, wants us to think: this is the glory of the Lord coming back to fill the Temple! This is the pillar of cloud and fire coming to lead the people through the wilderness! This is the restoration we've all been hoping for!³

On this long expected day, the Lord would restore Israel's fortunes. On the day when he would renew the Temple, the nations would flock to Zion to hear the word of the Lord. God's power and grace would reach out and summon people from every nation under heaven.

Luke wants us to understand that the prophesy is fulfilled. Parthians, Medes, Elamites and all the rest are coming to Jerusalem to hear God's word. Pentecost is not merely the renewal of Torah, but the fulfilling and renewing of the Temple. This fulfillment comes in a way the Jews did not expect, much as Jesus Himself arrived with His glory veiled. Wright comments that,

The apostles are constituted as the new, true Temple: not now a building of stone and timber, of bricks and mortar, but as a community of living, breathing, worshiping human beings. Just as in Judaism the Law and the Temple belong closely together, so now at Pentecost the renewed Law and the renewed Temple belong even more closely together. Both of them speak of men, women and children whose lives are being transformed by the living presence and power of the one true God.⁴

When God's Presence comes, the ordinary becomes extraordinary. Ordinary flesh is sanctified and takes on immortality. A burning bush becomes a sign and a wonder. The impossible becomes possible. Darkness is conquered. Nations and cities are transformed. Behold - a new creation!

Some years ago I spent time researching two themes in the book of Luke - the kingdom of God, and the Holy Spirit. In the process I discovered a textual variant in a third century manuscript in Luke 11:2. "Your kingdom come" became, "your Spirit come."

With the pouring out of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, everything changes. The new age arrives in Jesus, and the powers of the age to come. We have a new covenant, a new creation. The future breaks into the present, and the kingdoms of this world are becoming the kingdom of God and His Christ.

When Jesus ascends to the Father it becomes possible for him to fill all things. He sends His Spirit so that the church, His body, becomes the living tabernacle. And as Jesus was sent into the world to reveal the Father and to proclaim the good news of God's kingdom, so we are sent, empowered to God's mission by God's Spirit. James Brownson argues that it is our very sentness that defines our identity as the people of God.

³ NT Wright, *New Law, New Temple, New World*. Sermon for the feast of Pentecost, June 2003.

⁴ Ibid.

The sending of the Son expresses something basic about God: that God wants to be known. God's mission is to know and be known. Eternal life consists in knowing God, and Jesus Christ whom God sent (17:3). It is in Christ preeminently that we discover this—that God wants to be known, and it is central to Christ's mission that the world know this about God—that God is the one who sent Jesus. —To be fully united to God's mission is to be fully united to God. And it is this unity in mission to which the disciples are also invited.⁵

Part III

*Give us this daily our daily bread,
And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors,
And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil..*

The first section of this kingdom pattern of prayer referenced the things of God. This second section pertains to our needs as we live the Jesus way. Our fundamental need as we engage in God's mission is for protection: protection of our physical resources, protection of our conscience (and our relationships in the community), and protection from temptation.

To be seeking God's kingdom, to be absorbed in his purpose, is to engage in warfare. Again and again, and in particular in the book of Luke with its dual theme of kingdom and Spirit, we hear the note of conflict. The kingdom of God is opposed to the kingdoms and powers of this world. We have more than the conflict of competing narratives, though the Empire does want to sell us its own version of the gospel.

We have conflict within and fears without; conflict from fellow believers, and the struggle with our own desires. We humans resist change, and particularly when it takes us from those things we hold dear. Jim Wallis frames it like this:

Thus, the renewal of the church will come not through a recovery of personal experience or straight doctrine, nor through innovative projects of evangelism or social action, nor in creative techniques or liturgical worship, nor in the gift of tongues, nor in new budgets, new buildings, and new members. The renewal of the church will come about through the work of the Spirit in restoring and reconstituting the church as a local community whose common life bears the marks of radical obedience to the lordship of Jesus Christ.

Practically, this means a clear recognition that the demands of obedient discipleship will bring us into conflict with the ordinary social values and normal patterns of the world systems which continually seek to fashion us into their image and conform us to their molds.⁶

For the first century Jew reading or hearing this prayer, the echo is of the Exodus event: provision on the journey as they are delivered from their enemies in Egypt. The manna was given from heaven by God, a supernatural provision that was enough for each day. It couldn't be saved for the next day. The journey required profound dependence on God.

In addition to this external pressure, we also face opposition from a supernatural enemy. He has much at stake in this battle, even though he knows the war is lost. He has been in this battle a long time, and he's had time to learn a few things. One way to attack is to hit the supply lines. If he can limit our resources, he can limit our ability to fight in the battle.

But what if his ability to hit our resources is limited? He can hit us physically, with illness or accidents. If this doesn't work, he can wage psychological warfare. "Divide and conquer" is always a good strategy. He can use fear, misunderstanding, or appeal to our ego to bring division and strife. This is why James reminds us..

⁵ James Brownson, *The God Who Sent Jesus*. From "Gospel in Our Culture Network" www.gocn.org

⁶ Jim Wallis, *Agenda for Biblical People*. New York: Harper and Row, 1976. 101

*What causes fights and quarrels among you?
Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?
You desire but do not have, so you kill.
You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. (4:1,2)*

If we are fighting with each other, if there is resentment or bitterness among us, we will not living the Jesus way. Forgiveness becomes a powerful spiritual resource, a means to walk in the Spirit and in his power. In community the healing of our own lives becomes the foundation for the healing of the nations.

If the enemy can't create conflict in the camp and can't corrupt our conscience, he can perhaps distract our attention with appeals to the flesh: sex, money, power. We aren't likely to stand against such an assault unless we are already well on the road to God's kingdom. Our cultures obsession with these things isn't broken by will power alone, and so we recognize again our dependence on God and his Spirit. We have to be immersed in spiritual practices, with our hearts directed to a stronger love, and guarded and nurtured by strong relationships. Brian McLaren writes,

The Kingdom of God.. is a revolutionary, counter-cultural movement-proclaiming a ceaseless rebellion against the tyrannical trinity of money, sex, and power. Its citizens resist the occupation of this invisible Caesar through three categories of spiritual practice. First.. generosity.. second.. prayer... finally.. fasting.⁷

To these three I would add James classic call to confession (5:13-16)

Conclusion

The first part of the kingdom prayer establishes the desires of our hearts for God's kingdom. The second part of the prayer enables us to remain active with God and participating in His mission — hallowing His name and asking that His kingdom come, His will be done on earth as in heaven.

To pray with understanding is not to pray with the mind alone. Let's take a lesson from the Great Commandment as we pray the kingdom prayer – come with your heart, your mind, and your strength. Present your whole self to God and let His Spirit fill you.

Lord, may your kingdom come – may your Name be holy!

⁷ Brian McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus*. W Publishing Group, 2006.