

Our Father IN HEAVEN

May 7, 2023

4 of 10 in *Pray Like Jesus*

We're in a series on the Lord's Prayer, and this series connects with Cornerstone's main theme for 2023:

Making space for JOY and FLOURISHING

- In our lives
- In our church
- In our community
- In the world

We've talked about how joy is the positive energy that comes from sharing a relational connection. Of course, our most fundamental relational connection is with God. As scripture says, in God's presence is fullness of joy. ¹

Currently, we're focusing on the subject of prayer, because prayer is the primary means we've been given to connect with God relationally.

As we grow in prayer, we grow in the joy of the Lord— *which is our strength*—even and especially during challenging times. ² From there, we learn to flourish in life and ministry, and this allows us to become agents who bring God's flourishing—God's *shalom*— to the world around us.

When it comes to prayer, we can have no better teacher and example than Jesus himself. When his disciples asked him to teach them to pray, Jesus gave them a model prayer we've come to know as *The Lord's Prayer*. To use the Lord's Prayer as a framework for your own praying is to learn to pray like Jesus prayed.

The Lord's Prayer is a concise summary of God's desire, will and agenda for you, for me, for the church, and for the world. It's the kind of praying that God delights to hear and to answer.

At this time, I invite you to follow along on the screen and join me in praying— aloud and in unison—Matthew's version of The Lord's Prayer:

Our Father in heaven,
may your name be kept holy.
May your Kingdom come soon.

¹ See Psalm 16:11

² See Nehemiah 8:10

May your will be done on earth,
as it is in heaven.
Give us today the food we need,
and forgive us our sins,
as we have forgiven those who sin against us.
And don't let us yield to temptation,
but rescue us from the evil one.³

In this series, the question before us is: What would happen if we let The Lord's Prayer shape our own praying?

I don't think it's hyperbole to say that it could very well transform your relationship with God, and the way you see and engage the world around you.

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To that end, I trust that many of you have been using *The Lord's Prayer Guide* resource in your daily prayer times as we go through this series. If you don't have a copy of the guide yet, you can download one for free at the link you see on the screen:

To let the Lord's Prayer shape how you pray will probably mean learning to pray differently than you've been used to— at least in some respects.

For example, last Sunday Pastor Jeremy talked about how Jesus teaches us to address God in prayer as *Our* Father.

Not *my* Father, but *our* Father. That is to say, Jesus teaches me to keep God's family in the forefront of my praying. Because God is not just *my* Father, he's *our* Father, and he calls us together into a life of mutually supportive love, teamwork and unity.

God's call to community should impact how we pray. Indeed, notice how Jesus stamps "we" language throughout his model prayer:

Give **us** today the food **we** need.

Forgive **us our** sins as **we** have forgiven those who sin against **us**.

Don't let **us** yield to temptation but deliver **us** from the evil one.

³ Matthew 6:9-13 (NLT)

Not just me. *Us*. What might happen if you started to pepper your prayers with lots of second person plural pronouns— *our*, *we*, and *us*? Do you think maybe God would shape you into a person who has not just your own interests, but also the interests of others in mind—especially those who belong to the body of Christ?

Of course, above all else, we are to pray with *God's* interests in mind. Because in the Lord's Prayer, before we ask anything for ourselves, what does Jesus teach us to pray?

Father, ***your*** name be kept holy. ***Your*** kingdom come. ***Your*** will be done.

Really, the pronouns of the Lord's Prayer provide us with an important lesson about how God wants us to pray.

We start with God himself: Father—*You, You, You*.

Then we pray for our family in Christ: *Us, us, us*.

In teaching us to pray this way, Jesus is shaping us into people who love God with everything we've got, and who love others as we love ourselves.⁴

Does this mean you're not allowed to talk to God about yourself when you pray—about your own feelings, needs, and concerns? *Of course* you can talk to God about those things. The Bible shows us lots of example of people who pray to God about their personal needs. Indeed, God desires you to do so, every day.

But the pronouns of the Lord's Prayer—*You, You, You*—along with *us, us, us*— remind me that if my prayers don't expand past the realm of "me, myself, and I" then I'm not praying like Jesus prayed, and I've got some growing up to do as his disciple.

A couple weeks ago, Pastor Andrew shared that when Jesus invites us to address God as Father— our *Abba*—he's calling us into deepest personal intimacy with God. If God is our *Abba*, it means he's approachable. It means he always has our best interests in mind. It means he is keenly aware of and responsive to our truest needs.

And what you'll find is that the more you learn to pray, "Father YOUR name, YOUR kingdom, YOUR will," the more you'll come to realize that in the process, God will faithfully give *you* everything *you* need.

⁴ See Matthew 22:37-40

This is exactly what Jesus says in Matthew chapter 6, right after he teaches us the Lord's Prayer. He tells us to:

Seek the Kingdom of God above all else... and he will give you everything you need.⁵

In the early weeks of this series, we've been lingering on the opening words of the Lord's Prayer: *Our Father in heaven*.

If the word *Father* invites us into intimacy with God, and the word *our* calls us into community with one another, what's the significance of the phrase *in heaven*?

That little phrase is surprisingly rich with meaning, and it actually has tremendous significance for our relationship with God, and how we pray. So much so, that we're going to spend the rest of this message unpacking it.

Now, when you pray *Our Father IN HEAVEN*, what's your impression of the phrase "in heaven"? Have you ever thought about it?

Many people hear that phrase and get the sense that God is somehow distant, far away from us. He's "in heaven"— way up high, somewhere out there. The phrase might give us the impression that perhaps, it would be helpful to pray with one of these [a megaphone]:

God, can you hear me now?

Because God is "in heaven", he must therefore be so remote, so far removed from our everyday lives on this planet, that we need all the help we can get to make our voices heard in prayer.

A tech columnist named Charles Lin once conducted an experiment where he sent emails to God to see if he'd get any replies.⁶

To: God@gmail.com.

Subject: Hi

Message: Dear God, Who, what, why, when and where are you? Also, can Laura have a pony?

I'm guessing Laura was this columnist's daughter.

For good measure, he also sent emails to Jesus@gmail.com, Zeus@gmail.com, and Xipe.totec@gmail.com, along with several others.

⁵ Matthew 6:33 (NLT)

⁶ Charles Lin, *God, Are You Out There?* (2007, Sep. 11) <http://tech.mit.edu/V127/N37/clin.html>

That last one is the Aztec god of flaying, and what's wild is that the columnist actually got a reply back from someone out there who happened to have the email address Xipe.totec@gmail.com.

But there was no reply from God@gmail.com, nor was there one from Jesus. Mr. Lin was kind of disappointed. Then it occurred to him. The reason God@gmail.com and Jesus@gmail.com didn't work was because Google's account creation page stipulates that usernames must be between 6 and 30 characters long. Usernames like God or Jesus aren't allowed.

Mr. Lin then tried a new strategy and sent the same message to Jehovah@gmail.com. And just to cover his bases, he BCC'd theholyspirit@gmail.com.

Lin concluded his column with these words: "I just hope they get Wi-Fi in heaven."

[Picking up megaphone again]

*Hey Big Guy Upstairs, Father way up there **in heaven**. Can you hear me?? Did you get my emails? Oh, and Laura is still wondering about that pony!*

But when he teaches us to pray, *Our Father IN HEAVEN*, Jesus is in no way suggesting that God is distant. Quite the opposite. By the words "in heaven" Jesus is actually assuring us that **God is near**, and that **God is able**.

Let's explore those two points now, starting with:

1. **God is near.**

Christians in the Western world have tended to think of heaven as somewhere up there or out there— a place where those who follow Jesus get to go when they die, leaving this tired old earth far, far behind. And the fact that many of us have come to view heaven as a far-away realm that we'll get to *eventually* when this life is over has affected how we see God himself. Why? Because Jesus tells us God is our Father *in heaven*. Right? So consciously or subconsciously, many of us see God the same way we see heaven— as far away and for much later.

But while most English translations of the Lord's Prayer begin with the words: "Our Father *in heaven*," the original Greek uses the plural form of the word *heaven*. It literally reads, "Our Father, the one *in the heavens*."

Jesus was a Jew, and the Jewish understanding of heaven was that it incorporated multiple layers. And so Jesus and his fellow Jews would think not so much of *heaven* but of *the heavens*.

Their view was that the very air around us—the air we breathe, the air the birds fly in—forms the first heaven. And God is there. The vast expanse of the night sky forms the second heaven. God is also there. And then, there's the third heaven— a spiritual realm we can't see—the realm of angels. God is there, too. It's where his throne is.

So God our Father is the one *in the heavens*. Do you know what that means? One thing it certainly *doesn't* mean is that God is distant. On the contrary, it means that God is always near, no matter where you may find yourself. It means that God closer than the air you breathe.

And so the psalmist prays to God:

Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.
If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
if I settle on the far side of the sea,
even there your hand will guide me,
your right hand will hold me fast.⁷

In 2 Corinthians, the Apostle Paul writes of an experience where he is caught up to the third heaven.⁸ His experience may well have been similar to a vision the prophet Isaiah had centuries earlier, when he saw the LORD seated gloriously on his throne, with angelic beings all around him crying out, "Holy, holy, holy."⁹

But as lofty as that vision was, the biblical notion of even the third heaven is still not that of a far-away realm. Rather, it's a very present reality on just the other side of a curtain that prevents our eyes from seeing it.

In the Bible, every once in a while, that curtain gets pulled back, and a servant of God like Isaiah or Paul gets a glimpse into the otherwise invisible heavenly reality that's very close at hand.

⁷ Psalm 139:7-10 (NIV)

⁸ See 2 Corinthians 12:2

⁹ See Isaiah 6:1ff

We see one example of this in the book of 2 Kings, where a young servant wakes up to find an enemy army surrounding the city in order to seize his master, the prophet Elisha.¹⁰

He steps outside, and sees troops, horses and chariots swarming everywhere. Panicked, the young man calls back to Elijah, "Oh, sir, what will we do now?"

"Don't be afraid!" Elisha told him. "For there are more on our side than on theirs!"

Um, boss? How much did you, like, drink last night? Because all I see is that it's you and me against a whole army.

Then Elisha prayed, "O Lord, open his eyes and let him see!" The Lord opened the young man's eyes, and when he looked up, he saw that the hillside around Elisha was filled with horses and chariots of fire.¹¹

In other words, God's angel armies were present. They remained unseen until God gave the young man a glimpse behind the curtain into a heavenly realm which wasn't far away at all, but rather very close at hand—[walk behind stage curtain and peek out]— *it's just the other side of the curtain.*

So in teaching us to pray, "Our Father *in heaven*" – or more accurately, "Our Father *in the heavens*" – Jesus never intended that we view our Christian lives in terms of "us down here" and "God way up there and out there"—the Big Guy in the Sky who's so high atop some celestial staircase that we need [picking up megaphone again] all the help we can get to make our voices heard in prayer.

Instead, Jesus wants to assure us that we pray to the God who is near: "Father all around us"; and "Father very close at hand."¹²

Theologian Dallas Willard encourages us to paraphrase the Lord's Prayer like this now and then when we pray it.¹³ Doing so helps you reclaim what Jesus actually meant when he taught us to pray, "Our Father, *in the heavens.*"

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In fact, the front page of the Lord's Prayer Guide includes Dallas Willard's paraphrase so you can use it from time to time as you prayer the Lord's Prayer. Again, you can find the prayer guide at the link on the screen:

¹⁰ See 2 Kings 6:13-17

¹¹ 2 Kings 6:17 (NLT)

¹² Darrell Johnson, *57 Words that Changed the World: A Journey Through the Lord's Prayer*, p. 22.

¹³ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God*, p. 257.

One classic, time-tested form of prayer that can help you live into the fact that God is near is called *Practicing the Presence of God*. It involves a range of practical things you can do to remember and enjoy God's nearness moment-by-moment.

For example, you might use an empty chair and make it your Father-chair or Jesus-chair. Keep it near you throughout the day as a visible, tangible reminder of God presence with you. This simple practice, and others like it, have helped me tremendously when it comes to remaining awake, alert and responsive to God's presence when otherwise I would have totally oblivious to his nearness.

www.cornerstonechurch.ca/presenceofjesus

In fact, for those interested, I am making a guide sheet available that describes several practices along these lines that you can try, along with some related book recommendations. Download it at the link you see on the screen, or help yourself to a printed copy at the Welcome Desk in the lobby.

In teaching us to pray, "Our Father in heaven," we've seen that Jesus is assuring us, first, that God is near. At the same time, Jesus is assuring us that:

2. God is ABLE.

To Jesus' original Jewish hearers, the phrase *in the heavens* as it applies to God would immediately evoke thoughts not only of God's nearness, but also of his greatness.

The fact that God is our Father *in the heavens* means his presence permeates every dimension of the cosmos. As near as he always is, God is in no way confined to our small world, but is truly the Sovereign of all creation:

God inhabits the realm that we can only see with a microscope.

God inhabits the realm we can see only see with the most powerful telescope.

God inhabits the realms of the things we can't see, either because they're so tiny, so vast, or so far away.

And God also inhabits that invisible spiritual realm that lies just the other side of the curtain.

So when we pray, "Our Father *in the heavens*," we not only remember that God is closer than the air we breathe. We also remember his enormity, grandeur, and infinite greatness.

If the word *Father* invites us into intimacy with God, the phrase *in the heavens* keeps us from sliding into a posture of sappy over-familiarity with God by calling us into a posture of reverent awe.

Praying to our infinite, limitless Father in the heavens, therefore, puts us quickly and deeply in touch with our own finiteness, limitations, and weaknesses. It's humbling.

Still, we have every reason to rejoice, because through the death and resurrection of Jesus, the God who transcends all limitations has become our Father, our *Abba*.

Therefore, where you and I are not able, "the one in the heavens" is more than able— and, wonder of wonders— he invites us to pray to him and ask him to do what *only he* can do.

The fact that our Father is *the one in the heavens* means he is able to accomplish what we ask of him in prayer—providing we ask with right motives, and in accordance with his good purposes and will.¹⁴

Indeed, the fact that our Father is *the one in the heavens* means that God is on the throne, because Jesus tells us in Matthew that to speak of heaven is to speak of God's throne.¹⁵ As professor Darrell Johnson explains:

If this is not so, then we are wasting our breath praying the Lord's Prayer. Sure, it may be therapeutic to pray, but if the one to whom we pray is not on the throne, then we have no real hope that he can do what we ask him to do. At best he can say, "I am doing my best." Jesus is telling us that there is a throne—all around us—and someone is sitting on it. We can therefore dare to hope that when we pray, something happens.¹⁶

– Darrell Johnson

Specifically, our Father who is in the heavens, and therefore on the throne, has all power and authority to answer the petitions of the Lord's Prayer. Let me give you a few examples.

Father, *hallowed be Thy name*. In other words, may God's name be made known. May God's name be treasured and loved. Are you a parent who longs for your children to come to know, treasure and love God's name? Or do you desire the same for a spouse, a parent, a friend, neighbour, or co-worker? Then pray. **God is on the throne. He is able.**

Father, *give us this day our daily bread*. What are your needs today, or those of your loved ones? Do you need literal bread? Shelter? Financial provision? Practical help? Rest?

¹⁴ See James 4:3

¹⁵ See Matthew 5:34

¹⁶ Johnson, *57 Words that Changed the World*, p. 22.

Strength? Patience? Whatever your needs are today, pray. **God is on the throne. He is able.**

Father, *forgive us our sins as we have forgiven those who sin against us.* Are you carrying a heavy burden of guilt that you just can't shake for your sins you've committed in thought, word, or deed? Or, do you find it next to impossible to forgive someone who deeply hurt you? Pray. **God is on the throne.** You aren't able, but **he is able.**

Father, *don't let us yield to temptation.* Do you feel a pull toward pride, envy, anger, greed, sloth, gluttony, or lust? Are you tempted to give in? You know that willpower isn't enough. Not even close. But you can pray. **God is on the throne. He is able.**

Later, at the end of the service, we're going to offer a time of prayer ministry across the front of the worship hall, like we did last Sunday. When that times comes, anyone who would like prayer may come forward to share their need and receive prayer. Whatever your need, it will be a space to pray to the God who is on the throne, to the God who is able.

These times of prayer ministry, which we are restarting after a long COVID hiatus, are designed to be times where we can come together as God's sons and daughters—because he is *our* Father, our *Abba*— and pray together to the one who is *in the heavens*— to the God who is near and who is able.

Again, prayer ministry will be available at the end of the service, but at this time, we're going to celebrate the Lord's Supper...

COMMUNION

PRAYER MINISTRY

At this time, I'd like to ask the prayer ministers to come to the front. Anyone who would like to receive prayer is welcome to come to come forward, and share your need with any prayer minister. If you'd like to have your forehead anointed with oil for healing, as the Bible talks about in James 5, just let your prayer minister know.

We ask those not coming forward to pray either exit quietly, or if you wish, to linger in your seat for a few minutes of quiet prayer before you go. Or, you can pray with a friend, or group up and form little circles of prayer.