

Andrews University

Digital Commons @ Andrews University

Faculty Publications

3-1-1980

The Disciples' Prayer

James J. C. Cox
Andrews University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pubs>



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), and the [Practical Theology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Cox, James J. C., "The Disciples' Prayer" (1980). *Faculty Publications*. 4026.
<https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pubs/4026>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Andrews University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Andrews University. For more information, please contact repository@andrews.edu.



The Disciples' Prayer

by James J. C. Cox

Better known as the Lord's Prayer, the familiar words take on a new significance when viewed as a prayer belonging to His disciples.

Among the most familiar of Bible passages is that passage we usually call the Lord's Prayer. Actually, it ought to be known as the Disciples' Prayer because in both the Gospels in which it occurs (Matt. 6:9-13 and Luke 11:2-4), the prayer is given by the Lord to His disciples.

Luke 11:1 states that one of the disciples specifically asked Jesus for a prayer comparable to the prayer that John had taught his disciples. It was common at that time for various groups to have distinctive prayers. Indeed, such prayers identified individuals as belonging to this or that particular group. The Pharisees had their prayers; the Essenes had theirs; and, according to Luke, John the Baptist's followers had theirs. So Jesus' disciples asked for a prayer, and Jesus gave them one—the Disciples' Prayer.

This well-known prayer, as it appears in the Gospel of Matthew, actually con-

sists of three parts. The first part is the address: "'Our Father who art in heaven'" (chap. 6:9).^{*} Then follows a set of three petitions couched in the second person singular (for that reason they are called the *thou petitions*): "Let Thy name be hallowed"; "let Thy kingdom come"; "let Thy will be done, as in heaven, so on earth." A second set of three petitions employs the first person plural (thus they are called the *we petitions*) and forms the third division: "Give us today our bread for tomorrow"; "forgive us our debts as we have forgiven our debtors"; and "lead us not into (the) temptation, but deliver us from the evil one."

The first set of petitions is carefully formulated in synonymous parallelism, and thus its three clauses have one basic significance.

What are we to make of these three petitions? Recent literature on the Disci-

ples' Prayer has stressed an element that is usually given little attention. Separately and together these three petitions have a distinct eschatological significance. They relate to the future and suggest that the disciples of Jesus should "pray in" that future. This is not to deny that they also have an existential significance, but the eschatological emphasis is primary.

When we consider the first of these petitions—"Let Thy name be hallowed"—the question immediately arises, Who is intended as the "agent" in this hallowing, or sanctifying, process?

The early church fathers discussed this issue at length. Many argued that the agent referred to was each individual disciple. It was his/her responsibility to hallow, or sanctify, the name of the Father. Among these were Augustine, and at a much later time, his most famous disciple, Luther.

But others felt that such an interpretation was not quite fair to the petition itself. They held that the reference was to God. They called attention to the fact that the verb occurs in the passive form, and that this construction often serves as a surrogate for the divine name. They furthermore pointed out that in the Old Testament it is God alone who is holy within Himself, and that only through worship of God or through service for Him do people and things become holy.

Actually, there are very few references in the Old Testament to the idea that man may in any way hallow the divine name. Rather, there is a consistent view that God Himself sanctifies His name in and through His people, and in and through salvation history (see Lev. 11:45; Ps. 89:18; Eze. 36:22-27).

When we turn to the New Testament, we find precisely the same notion. God manifests His holiness and hallows His name in and through Jesus Christ, who is described as "the Holy One of God" (Mark 1:24). This idea is most clearly expressed in John 12:28. At the close of His public ministry, Jesus prays to His Father, "Father, glorify thy name." To this the Father replies, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again."

We should note the deliberate use of both the past and the future tenses. First of all, God *has glorified* His name in and through the words and works of Jesus. He *will glorify* His name again in the future, both in the return of the Son to the Father and in the giving of the Holy Spirit, through whom He will continue to be with His people.

Thus there is, in both the Old and the New Testaments, an implicit eschatological notion associated with the idea of the hallowing of God's name. When the disciples of Jesus pray, "Let Thy name be hallowed," they pray that God will accomplish that ultimate sanctification of His name that will result from the complete manifestation of His holiness through the finalizing of His salvific intentions. This is borne out by the second and third petitions in this first group, which indicate that the sanctification of His name consists in the final coming of His kingdom and in the perfection of His will.

Let us, then, look at the second petition, "Let Thy kingdom come." Again, the early church had quite a debate as to whether or not this phrase referred to a divine act or to a human one. Is it a prayer in which the disciples ask that God allow them to bring in His kingdom, or is it a prayer in which the disciples

request the Father to bring it in?

Tertullian and Chrysostom, and later Luther and Calvin, wrestled with this question, finally concluding that the petition is intended as a request addressed to the Father, asking that He bring in His kingdom, and that it contains a genuine eschatological reference. And indeed, that is what we should certainly anticipate from both the Old and the New Testaments.

Isaiah 24:23 connects the signs of the last days—including the darkening of the sun and the moon—with the time when "the Lord of hosts will reign" and His glory be magnified. Daniel 7:18 clearly points out that the saints of the Most High receive the kingdom of God after all other earthly kingdoms have been moved out of the way. In both of these texts it is clear that God is the agent, and in both there is a very distinct eschatological overtone.

Surely no one can read the parables of Jesus in Matthew 13 and Mark 4 without concluding that one of the very basic elements in His teachings concerning the kingdom of God is that man does *not* bring in the kingdom. To do so is not within his power. Jesus is quite clear that it is *God* who brings in the kingdom; man responds to the actions of God.

Furthermore, it is equally clear that the kingdom of God about which Jesus speaks is His eschatological kingdom. Of course, one might object that, because of the teachings and the activities of Jesus, the kingdom had already been brought in. One might quote Jesus' words in Luke 11:20: "If it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you." One might also recall that, according to Luke 17:21, Jesus claimed that because He was in their midst, the kingdom of God was in their midst. And surely we must agree that there was a proleptic (or inaugurated) fulfillment of this eschatological hope in both the words and the works of Jesus. But it is equally true that if indeed Jesus has already established the rule of God on earth, then He has also prepared the way for its fuller establishment in the future.

So when Jesus invites His disciples to pray "Let Thy kingdom come," He is encouraging them to pray that God will bring about His complete and ultimate rule. Again the eschatological factor is obvious. Indeed, the idea in the phrase "coming of the kingdom," which occurs in a number of places in the New Testament, regularly expresses a future eschatological concern.

The third petition reads, "Let Thy will be done." Once more, the early fathers debated the intention of this petition. Is it a call to the disciples of Jesus to fulfill God's commands, or is it an invitation to them to pray that God will effect His will "on earth as it is in heaven"?

The idea of the divine will's becoming effective in human experience is a notion that is consistently given an eschatological accent in the New Testament. For instance, Ephesians 1:5-12 sets out the salvific plan of God and refers to it as the expression of the *divine will*, in such terms as "the purpose of his will" (verse 5), "the mystery of his will" (verse 9), and "the counsel of his will" (verse 11).

By inviting His disciples to pray "Let Thy will be done," Jesus was inviting them to pray that God might accomplish His ultimate will in all the earth.

If this is a fair interpretation of these three petitions, then the three are closely linked and are really expressing different aspects of the same basic thought—the eschatological expression of God's glory in the presence of man. Petition one, regarding the name, emphasizes the more internal aspects of His expressed glory. Petition two, regarding the kingdom, expresses the more external aspects. And petition three, regarding His will, emphasizes the more universal aspects.

The second set of petitions—the *we petitions*—is also threefold: "Give us today our bread for tomorrow"; "forgive us our debts as we have forgiven our debtors"; and "lead us not into (the) temptation, but deliver us from the evil one."

Here we must consider the possibility of a rather distinct shift. There is a shift, as we have already seen, from the third person imperative to the second person imperative and from the second person singular pronoun to the first person plural pronoun. But many modern scholars have seen another shift, from an eschatological concern to an existential one. Others say that there is no such shift at this point and that the eschatological element is still the primary one. So let us look at these three petitions and see whether, in fact, they do have an eschatological dimension.

I have translated the first petition in this group as "Give us today our bread for tomorrow." The key to a proper translation hinges on the meaning of the Greek word *epiousios*.

In the third century A.D., Origen puzzled over this word and scoured Greek authors to find other examples of it. He

came to the conclusion that the word occurs nowhere else in Greek literature. Today, seventeen centuries later, we are without any additional literary evidence.

How then shall we proceed in an attempt to determine the meaning of this key term? We may turn to etymology, but meanings based on etymology alone are seldom to be trusted. Some have suggested that *epiousios* is derived from the preposition *epi* plus a form of the verb "to be." From this they have then derived either the meaning "daily (bread)" or "(bread) for existence."

Others have proposed that the word is derived from the preposition *epi* plus a form of the verb "to come." Such a derivation is possible, and if correct, the word *epiousios* would mean "(bread) for the coming day" or "(bread) for tomorrow."

Obviously, those who interpret the prayer existentially refer to the former of these derivations, and those who understand it eschatologically draw on the latter. Incidentally, the latter understanding is very old. For example, the commentary of Jerome on Matthew 6:11 clearly indicates that he understood this verse as having eschatological significance.

If we translate this petition "Give us today our bread for tomorrow," we have a prayer essentially meaning "Bring the future into the present."

In Psalm 78:24 the psalmist says God "gave them bread from heaven" (T.L.B.),[†] and, according to John 6:32, Jesus extrapolated from this verse as follows: "Don't read the psalm as if it referred simply to the children of Israel, but read it as a reference to yourselves, and read it in an eschatological sense: 'Your Father gives you the bread from heaven, namely, the Son of man.'"

As Jesus later develops the idea that He is Himself the bread from heaven, He adds, "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day" (verse 54). Surely there is here a patent eschatological reference.

The second of these three *we petitions* reads, "Forgive us our debts as we have forgiven our debtors." What about this matter of the forgiving of debts? It is interesting that within the New Testament, and especially within the teachings of Jesus, wherever the idea of the remission of debts (of sins) occurs, the context almost always refers to the coming judgment. On that basis, should we not understand that this language also has an eschatological dimension?

"Do not lead us into temptation" is the usual translation of the third petition in this grouping. The Greek word translated *temptation* is understood in a general, abstract sense. But if the term *temptation* is to be understood in this way, then significant theological problems arise regarding God as one who tempts man. In order to overcome these difficulties, some have attempted to translate the phrase, "Do not allow us to fall into temptation." However, that really forces the Greek text.

What, in fact, is the real meaning of the word *temptation* in this context? Does it refer to temptation in a general sense? Quite possibly James was responding to such an interpretation when he wrote, "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am tempted by God'; for God . . . himself tempts no one" (chap. 1:13). James was well acquainted with the teachings in the Sermon on the Mount. He treats them at several points in his letter. Therefore he may well be dealing with this particular petition of the Disciples' Prayer.

Or does it refer to temptation in a more specific sense? The early church fathers understood the term *temptation* to have an eschatological sense—to refer to the ultimate and final temptation. At this point there are two helpful messages:

The first is the story of Jesus' ordeal in the Garden of Gethsemane. Here He is in an ultimate struggle with the devil, and in the midst of this He says to His disciples, "Pray that you may not enter into temptation" (Mark 14:38). It seems that He is urging the disciples to pray that they may not be overtaken in the great, final conflict.

The second is Revelation 3:10. Jesus promises in this text that because of their faithfulness, He will keep His people from the hour of temptation. The temptation referred to here seems clearly to be that diabolical struggle in which the devil will make his ultimate onslaught against Christ and His people.

If this is right, then the petition has an eschatological dimension. The prayer then might rightly be translated, "Do not bring us into (the) temptation."

In the next clause—"deliver us from evil"—we seem to move to a climax. If *temptation* in the preceding clause does not refer to an abstract, general notion, but to a very specific event in the outworking of the history of salvation, then may not this parallel expression refer not to an abstract notion of evil, but to a particular person involved in that final

struggle, namely the devil himself? Should we not then translate it as "deliver us from the evil one"?

Jesus spoke in clear terms of the evil one. In the parable of the sower and the seed, it is the "evil one" who snatches away the seed (Matt. 13:19). In the parable of the tares, the weeds are the sons of the "evil one" (verse 38). John, interpreting his Lord, contends that the "evil one" can never touch the One who is begotten of God (1 John 5:18). And Paul, speaking of the return of our Lord, says, "The Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one" (2 Thess. 3:3, N.I.V.).[‡] Does not this promise remind us of the petition that Jesus taught His disciples?

Perhaps closely related to this is another prayer of Jesus found in John 17 (which, by the way, ought to be called the Lord's Prayer). In it Jesus prays to His Father, "I do not pray that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil one" (verse 15).

Obviously, both clauses in the last petition of the Disciples' Prayer have a very distinct eschatological emphasis.

Now, does this eschatological interpretation of the Disciples' Prayer do away with the more common existential interpretation? I think not. Rather, the former lays the primary accent where it rightly belongs. Here is a prayer in which the disciples of Jesus are invited to "pray in" the kingdom of God. But, in a sense, that kingdom has already arrived in the life and deeds of Christ. The eschatology is not only futuristic but also proleptic (or inaugurated). That being the case, it is legitimate to extrapolate from this eschatological element to the more common interpretation in terms of our day-by-day experiencing of the kingdom.

However, would it not be helpful, in view of the fact that we have so often prayed the Disciples' Prayer stressing its more existential significance, to pray it, at least now and again, emphasizing its more eschatological significance? 

* Unless otherwise noted, Bible texts in this article, other than the author's individual translation, are from the Revised Standard Version.

† From *The Living Bible*, copyright 1971 by Tyndale House Publisher, Wheaton, Ill. Used by permission.

‡ From *The New International Version*. Copyright © 1978 by New York International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House.

James J. C. Cox, Ph.D., is professor of New Testament, Andrews University Theological Seminary, Berrien Springs, Michigan.