

The Lord's Prayer:

Should it be used by Christians?

by E. Dennett.

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This prayer is entwined with some of our holiest memories and associations. How many indeed were first taught to lisp its sacred petitions upon a mother's knees! It thus obtained a hold upon the affections — a hold that was deepened in after years as Lord's day after Lord's day it was, again and again, repeated in concert with hundreds in church or chapel. Then, too, it links in imagination the present with the past, and race with race; for fancy loves to dwell upon the fact that this same prayer, given by our Lord to His disciples, has found a place in the liturgies of every section of Christendom, and has thus been used for centuries, and is repeated week by week almost simultaneously by thousands of different climes and tongues. It is no wonder therefore that it should be regarded with especial reverence, and as possessing a sanctity peculiar to itself.

This has found a striking expression in connection with the revised version of the New Testament lately published. The revisers have ventured slightly to alter its phraseology, and to omit, because of insufficient evidence of their inspiration, the closing words - "for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen." Fault has been found with this, on the ground that "the old form in which the prayers of Englishmen have been uttered for so many generations ought to have been respected." Whatever may be thought of this verdict, the question raised in our minds is, Should this prayer be used by Christians? In other words, Did our Lord intend it to be adopted by believers after the descent of the Holy Ghost at Pentecost? It is to the answer to these questions that we invite the serious attention of our readers.

First of all, it may be premised, and the fact is patent, that there are many prayers recorded before the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, especially in the Old Testament, which would be entirely unsuitable for this dispensation. Take some of the petitions recorded in the Psalms - imprecatory petitions, as they are called. Turn for example to Psalm 69: 22-28, and it will be at once perceived that the spirit of such prayers is utterly alien from that inculcated upon the Christian. So also with many of the prayers found in Jeremiah (Jer. 10: 24, 25; Jer. 18: 19-23, etc.), and in other Old Testament Scriptures. This will suffice to show that a prayer indited by the Spirit of God in one period or dispensation is not necessarily suited to the people of God of every age. Bearing this principle in mind, we may examine the prayer which the Lord gave to His disciples.

It should be noted at the very outset that it contains no trace of redemption. It may be said that this is assumed; and yet it can hardly be so, if we remember the distinctive feature of redemption as given in the epistle to the Ephesians: "In whom" (i.e. Christ), says the apostle, "we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace." (Eph. 1: 7.) It is quite true that the prayer could only be used by those who were on the

ground of the people of God, as the Jews were who had the appointed way and means of access to God; but we speak now of redemption as accomplished by the death and resurrection of Christ. So far from forgiveness being known through the precious blood of Christ, no more conscience of sins through His one sacrifice (Heb. 10), they are directed to cry, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." The efficacy of the precious blood of Christ was not therefore here anticipated, neither supposed to be known by those who should approach to God with these petitions on their lips. There is no point more important to be insisted upon, especially at the present time, than that known forgiveness of sins is, everywhere in the epistles, looked upon as the common heritage of every believer. The apostle John thus writes: "I write unto you, little children (and the term "children" in this place includes the whole family of God), "because your sins are forgiven you for His name's sake." (1 John 2: 12.) It is thus very evident that this prayer does not rise to the height, in this particular, of what may be termed the initial Christian blessing.

The opening words would, indeed, point to the same conclusion: "Our Father which art in heaven." This will require a word or two of simple explanation. Believers under the old dispensation were born again in the same way as believers since Pentecost. Both alike therefore are the children of God. But there are two differences to be specified. The Jewish believer never received, could not receive, the Spirit of adoption, because the Spirit was not then given; "because that Jesus was not yet glorified." (John 7: 39.) The apostle Paul explains this when he says, "The heir, as long as he is a child, differeth nothing from a servant, though he be lord of all; but is under tutors and governors until the time appointed of the father. Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world: but when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth His Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons. And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father. Wherefore thou art no more a servant, but a son; and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ." (Gal. 4: 1-7; see also Rom. 8: 14-17.) The second difference lies in the character of the calling. The Jewish saint had an earthly calling; i.e. his calling by God was for earth, and to earthly blessings. Even their future was characterised by a Messiah on earth, reigning on earth in His glorious kingdom. securing perfect earthly blessing. Psalm 72 may be read as an illustration of this, as well as Isaiah 60, Jeremiah 33, etc. But with the Christian all this is changed. His is an heavenly calling (see Heb. 3: 1; Phil. 3: 14, where it should read, "Calling on high of God." and 20th verse, "Our citizenship is in heaven"). Accordingly God does not promise earthly blessings to believers now. Having food and raiment, we are exhorted to be therewith content. (1 Tim. 6: 8.) "To depart and be with Christ is far better" than to remain here. (Phil. 1: 23.) All our hope is to be set upon the return of our blessed Lord to receive us unto Himself, that where He is we may be also. (John 14: 1-3; Phil. 3: 20, 21; 1 Thess. 1: 10; Rev. 22: 7, 12, 20.) We are therefore to live in the daily expectation of the consummation of this our hope, and in the meanwhile, under its influence and power, to purify ourselves even as He is pure. (1 John 3: 2, 3.) We are thus a heavenly people, with heavenly hopes, instead of being, as the Jews were, an earthly people, with earthly hopes — which earthly hopes will yet be accomplished in their restoration and blessing in their own land when the Lord appears with His saints to establish His kingdom.

The application of these distinctions will be evident. The Lord taught His disciples to say "our Father;" believers of this dispensation — the dispensation which commenced with the descent of the Holy Ghost on the day of Pentecost — cry. "Abba, Father;" i.e. know God as their

Father *through the indwelling Spirit*. Again, it was perfectly appropriate for the Jewish saint, because he was one of an earthly people, to say, "Our Father which art *in heaven*;" but the Christian being himself heavenly, belonging to heaven, with the privilege of dwelling even now in spirit in the Father's house, does not, when instructed, say, "Our Father which art in heaven," or even "Our heavenly Father," but, as we find everywhere in the epistles, and as the Lord Himself taught His own, through Mary, *after His resurrection*, "Our God and Father," because the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Compare John 20: 17 with Eph. 1: 3, etc.) To add the words "in heaven" now would be to forget what God in His wondrous grace has made us, and the full place of blessing into which we have been brought through the death and resurrection of our blessed Lord and Saviour.

If we turn again to the petition alluded to, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors," this conclusion will be strengthened. As we have shown, forgiveness of sins is the portion of all believers, and this forgiveness is eternal in its character. The efficacy of the precious blood of Christ, as set forth in Heb. 9 and 10, precludes the possibility of the imputation of guilt to the believer. The one offering of Christ is put again and again in contrast with the annually recurring sacrifices of the Jewish economy. "For Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands, which are the figures of the true; but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us. Nor yet that He should offer Himself often, as the high priest entereth into the holy place every year with blood of others: for then must He often have suffered since the foundation of the world: but now once in the end of the world (the ages) hath He appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself." (Heb. 9: 24-26.) Again, "And every priest standeth daily ministering, and offering oftentimes the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins: but this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins, for ever sat down on the right hand of God; from henceforth expecting till His enemies be made His footstool. For by one offering He hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified." (Heb. 10: 11-14.) These passages teach, beyond the possibility of doubt or question, two unmistakeable things: first, that the one sacrifice of Christ avails for ever; and, secondly, that the moment we come under its efficacy and benefits (and every believer is in this blessed place) our guilt is cleansed away for ever from the sight of God. We are "perfected for ever." There is "no more conscience of sins," if we understand the value of the precious blood of Christ. We are absolutely forgiven once and for all. To deny this would be to deny the efficacy of the one sacrifice of Christ.

"Yes," it may be replied, "we understand this fully as applied to our past sins; but what about the sins we commit day by day after conversion?"

There are two answers to this question. First, the guilt of all our sins - past, present, or future — is taken away by the blood of Christ. When the Lord Jesus "His own self bare our sins in His own body on the tree" (language which believers only can adopt), we had not committed sins at all. It could not be, therefore, that He bore a part, or some, of our sins only, or otherwise — far be the thought — He must die a second time. No; all our sins were laid upon Him in His death on the cross, and the guilt of all He expiated; so that we can rejoice before God in the knowledge that "the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin," that we are freed, once and for all, from all our guilt, and consequently that, once cleansed and made whiter than snow, not a single fleck or spot can evermore defile our perfect purity in the sight of God.

Secondly, God has made a provision of another kind for our daily sins. It is only too true, alas! that we do sin daily; but, true as that is, if we know the full value of the sacrifice of Christ, we shall never suffer for one moment the thought of the imputation of guilt. On the other hand, we must never lessen the gravity of our daily sins — sins now against light and love. No language could be too strong to express abhorrence of them. More even than this, it must never be forgotten that there is no *necessity* for the believer to sin daily. "My little children," says the apostle John, "these things write I unto you, that ye sin not." Having guarded the truth on this point, he then introduces the gracious provision that has been made for the sins into which the believer so often falls. "And if any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous: and He is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the whole world." (1 John 2: 1, 2.)

It is then the advocacy of Jesus Christ the Righteous with the Father that meets our case in respect of our daily sins. Brought into fellowship with the Father and His Son Jesus Christ (1 John 1: 3), we lose the enjoyment of this fellowship when we sin; and the object of the advocacy of our blessed Lord is to restore us to the place we have lost as to its enjoyment. And to this end He prays for us; not when we repent, but when we sin. In fact, our sins call forth His advocacy on our behalf; and it is in response to this that, sooner or later, the Spirit of God brings the word of God home to our consciences, thereby producing self-judgment, and leads us to confession in the presence of God; and then we find the truth of what the apostle states: "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1: 9.) This will come sooner or later; but it should be remembered — and this forbids the thought of making light of the believer's sins — that if self-judgment and confession be postponed, God as our Father may be constrained, in His love for us, to come in and deal with us in chastening and trial, to prepare for the action of His Word on our consciences; for He cannot suffer those who have been redeemed, His own children, to continue in a path of sin and iniquity. Sin is never a light thing in the eyes of God, and must never be a light thing in the eyes of His people. How could it be, when it was that which brought our blessed Lord to the dreadful cross?

It will be seen, from these observations, that the Christian has never to pray for the forgiveness of sins. The guilt of all his sins has been removed; and the condition of the forgiveness of his daily sins is confession. Now confession, inasmuch as it can only spring from self-judgment, is a much deeper thing than praying for forgiveness. Parents may soon verify this with their children. When these have committed faults, if they see that their parents are grieved, they will soon ask forgiveness; but if self-judgment, a true estimate of the character of their actions, and confession be required, it will not so readily be obtained. No; it is a much more serious thing to view our sins in the light of God's presence, to have God's mind about them, and to tell it all out in lowly confession; and it is this which God requires, and not prayer for forgiveness. The reason is simple. Propitiation has already been made, and forgiveness is ready to be bestowed, and He only waits until we have judged ourselves to assure us of His forgiving love, end to effect our restoration to the communion which we had lost.

Another remark: maybe made upon this petition — scarcely necessary after what has been said, save to obviate objections. The measure of the forgiveness to be prayed for is that of our forgiveness of others — "as we forgive our debtors." Knowing what we are, the subtlety of our hearts, our unconscious reserves, and our difficulty in many cases in granting a free, full, and

absolute forgiveness to those who have sinned against us, we could never know from this petition whether we might rejoice in the knowledge of the full pardon of our sins against God; and this would be entirely inconsistent with the truth we have been considering in Heb. 9 and 10. As given to the disciples in their then position, and in respect of their mutual relationships, and their relationships to all the children of *the kingdom*, we can perceive its perfect and divine wisdom, and even its applicability to the children of God, in respect of the Father's government, but it could not, in any wise, have been intended to be the expression of our need, in relation to our sins, in the presence of God.

As bearing upon the whole question of the use of this prayer, we now invite the reader's attention to a scripture in the gospel of John. On the very eve of the Lord's departure, He said to His disciples, "Ye now therefore have sorrow: but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you. And in that day ye shall ask me nothing. Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in My name, He will give it you. *Hitherto have ye asked nothing in My name: ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full.*" (John 16: 22-24.) If the "Lord's" prayer be carefully examined, nothing strikes the mind so forcibly as the absence of all allusion to the name of Christ. As far as the words go, they have no connection either with the name or the work of our blessed Lord and Saviour. And our Lord in this scripture expressly says, that up till that moment — and this was at the end of His earthly sojourn — His disciples had not asked anything of the Father in His name. Bearing in mind, then, that in all Christian prayer the only ground of approach to God is in the name of Christ, it follows; first, that the "Lord's" prayer was not in His name; and, secondly, that it could not therefore have been given for the use of His people after His death and resurrection.

Another fact of a different kind may be adduced as evidence in support of this conclusion. In the Acts and the Epistles we have a number of prayers recorded, as well as the especial blessings which the apostles desired for the believers to whom they were writing, and almost numberless allusions to prayer, but in no single instance is there the slightest trace of the adoption of the prayer under consideration, whether by individuals or by the saints when assembled together. This omission is surely significant in the light of the theory that the Lord gave in this prayer a form to be employed in the church until the close of the dispensation.

Considering then all these things together, we cannot but conclude that this theory is a mistake, that so far from our blessed Lord inditing a form of prayer for Christians, it is on the other hand evident that He only gave it to His disciples for their use until Pentecost. Thereafter indwelt by the Holy Ghost, they would be brought into the enjoyment of all the blessings secured in Christ by redemption, and with their hearts enlarged by His mighty power they would henceforth pray in the name of Christ and in the Holy Ghost. (See Eph. 1: 15-23. Eph. 3: 14-21; Eph. 6: 18; Jude 20, etc.) From that time their desires could only be bounded by the whole range of the purposes and interests of God. Neither these nor even their personal needs (see Phil. 4: 6) could find a full and adequate expression in this form of prayer.

It may be necessary to remind the reader that the remarks made have reference only to the use of this prayer by Christians as *a form in its entirety*. It is freely conceded, nay, insisted upon, that though we are brought into a new place through the death and resurrection of our Lord and Saviour, and into the known possession and enjoyment of higher blessings, we can go back in the

power of the Spirit, take up and present before God many of its petitions. Let us therefore pass through them in brief review.

It has been fully explained that the Christian — one at least who has spiritual intelligence — could not now properly address God as "our Father who art in heaven." But it is the same God, and He is known to us as "our God and Father," because the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. (John 20: 17.) When we pray, therefore, we do not say, "Our heavenly Father," since in His grace we also are a heavenly people, but simply "Our God and Father," because these titles express to us the twofold relationship into which we have been brought.

The first petition is, *Hallowed be Thy name* — one which we can ever utter, if indeed we understand its solemn purport. "Name" in Scripture is always the expression of what God is as revealed, and hence, in connection with the Father, it is the truth of what God is in that relationship. If, then, we desire that His name should be hallowed, it is that it should be sanctified in us, by us, and by all who have the privilege of calling upon God by this precious title, that there should be in us an answering response to His holiness in this relationship. Surely we have often uttered the petition with but little thought of what it involved, and even while we, as His children, were dishonouring His name as our Father, by our unholy ways and associations! To present this prayer means that we should be holy because He is holy, that His name should be sanctified in and by us in all that we are and do.

The next two petitions, *Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven*, we could also all adopt. It is, as will be perceived, the Father's kingdom. A reference to this will be found in this same gospel. "Then shall the righteous shine as the sun in the kingdom of their Father." (Matt. 13: 43.) From the context it is plain that this looks onward to the time when Christ shall have returned with His saints, and shall have taken His kingdom to Himself (v. 41); and When the saints shall be displayed in His glory in the Father's kingdom - the heavenly scene of the Father's government. The petition therefore expresses the desire for the arrival of the time when Christ shall come to be glorified in His saints. (2 Thess. 1: 10.)

"*Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven*," goes further still in its full accomplishment. Never but once has this been as yet seen on earth, and that was in the life and death of the Lord Jesus — the only One who could ever say, "I have glorified Thee on the earth: I have finished the work which Thou gavest Me to do." (John 17: 4.) He alone on earth has done the Father's will perfectly. Nor will it be done in the millennium, excepting by Himself as the King who shall reign in righteousness. There will be approximations to it, greater or less, by the saints of that time, but save by Himself, the will of the Father will not be done on earth as it is in heaven, not by a single saint. It surely, therefore, must point to the new heavens and the new earth, when the tabernacle of God will be with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be with them, and be their God. (Rev. 21: 3.) Then the will of the Father will be done on earth (the new earth), and never before, as it is done in heaven. The two petitions together will thus embrace two successive dispensations, that is, the millennium and the eternal state. How vast and comprehensive are the thoughts of God! And it is these thoughts and these desires He would have us share with Himself!

Give us this day our daily bread is more simple, and affords no difficulty, when it is regarded as the expression of our entire dependence upon God for our daily food, and, at the same time, will not fail to remind us of what the Israelites were taught in the wilderness, that the manna, Christ as the bread that came down from heaven, must be gathered and fed upon daily. (Exodus 16; John 6.)

We have already remarked upon, *And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors*, so that there only remains, *And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil*. This cry will always be suited to us while in this world with the sense of utter weakness, and knowing that we could not stand for one moment in temptation if left to ourselves. Nor is there any incongruity between such a petition and entire confidence in God; for there will be confidence in God just in proportion as we have learned that in our flesh there dwelleth no good thing. Afraid of ourselves, we shall ever cry, *Lead us not into temptation*, and this will lead to the further desire that we may be delivered from evil. This, indeed, was the request of the Lord Himself for His own — "I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil." (John 17: 15.) Whether the remaining words, the doxology, as it is termed, *For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever, Amen*, be part of Scripture or not, they undoubtedly express truth that all Christians delight to acknowledge and to turn into praise.

To sum up, then, we cannot but conclude, from the teaching of Scripture, that our Lord gave this prayer as a form for the use of His disciples only until Pentecost. But while affirming this, it is very evident that when we have been brought into the full light of Christianity, wherein forms of prayer are no longer consistent with the free activity of the Holy Spirit in the believer, we can, as led of the Spirit, adopt and present before God many of the blessed desires which the petitions of this prayer embody and express. It may be that, in a later day, when God will once more have His earthly people, the "Lord's" prayer will again be used as a whole. Be this as it may, it is of the first importance, in the meanwhile, to perceive that *Judaism, in its purest expression, is not Christianity*; and hence that language, which could be appropriately used in prayer before the death of Christ, is not of necessity the fit or intended vehicle for the desires of the Christian. The Lord would have us enter into His fullest thoughts of blessing for His people, and to be satisfied with nothing short of His own desires for us. May He give us the anointed eye to perceive, and the grace and power to occupy, the place into which we have now been brought through the death and resurrection of our blessed Lord and Saviour.