

Our Father

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[0 : 00] We're going to be primarily looking at this reading and at the Galatians chapter 4 reading today. You may have seen the movie Gravity. It stars Sandra Bullock who plays a character named Dr. Stone.

And there's one point in the movie where Dr. Stone is isolated and alone and she is facing the likelihood of her own death. And she's coming to grips with her own mortality.

And she says, she's all alone and she says, I'm going to die, aren't I God? I know we're all going to die, but I'm going to die today.

And then she says, I'd pray for myself, but I've never prayed in my life. Nobody ever taught me how. And I know this is a fictional story. It's a great movie, but it's a fictional story.

But I think that this part of the movie is very real. I think it's very human. In other words, prayer seems to be instinctive in times of crisis, regardless of whether or not we consider ourselves to be religious people.

[1 : 09] There have been many efforts to try to find cultures or societies, even primitive or isolated ones, that don't have some kind of prayer or religion in them.

And those efforts have largely failed. It seems as though prayer is a kind of universal phenomenon. Now, I'm not suggesting that every single person prays.

I know that many of you may not pray. Maybe you've never prayed. But I suspect that there are a lot of people around the world who maybe have never thought about God. They've never prayed.

They've never cared about any of this stuff.

Who nevertheless are now beginning to be open to the possibility. They may be feeling this desire to reach out because there's a kind of existential dread in the air right now.

A pall has been cast over life as a result of this pandemic. And I think that there's something in many of us that instinctively wants to reach out to know if there is some ultimate being out there or if we're alone in the universe.

[2 : 16] So what I want to do over the next few minutes and actually few weeks is to look at the topic of prayer together. And to do that, we're going to be looking at the Lord's Prayer, which is not just a formula to memorize and recite as many of us grew up thinking it was.

But each phrase of the Lord's Prayer is actually a kind of theological concentrate. It is densely packed with rich biblical theology spanning the Old and New Testaments.

So everything that you need to know about having a relationship with God is found in the Lord's Prayer. So if you don't understand prayer, if you don't understand this prayer, and you don't know what this prayer means, then you're not going to know how to have a relationship with God.

And you're not going to know how to pray. And of course those things go together. If you don't know how to pray, then you won't really be able to have a relationship with God. Because the essence of any relationship is communication.

And that's what prayer really is. So this is what we're going to be looking at. And this week we're going to start with just the first phrase of the Lord's Prayer. As Jesus says it, Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

[3 : 38] And we're going to be drawing from Matthew chapter 6, where Jesus teaches his disciples this prayer. And we're also going to be looking at Galatians chapter 4. And these are going to show us three things about prayer.

We're going to look at first the object of our prayer. The object of prayer. And then we're going to be looking at the problem with prayer. The problem with prayer.

And then lastly, we're going to be looking at the answer to that problem. So the object of prayer, the problem with prayer, and then the answer to the problem. Let's pray. Lord, as we open your word

and seek to know what it means to pray to you and to have a relationship with you, we know that this all depends on you.

That we need you to open your word to us, to enable us to see it clearly, to understand it. And then through it, to see your Son clearly, Lord, the living word.

And it's in his name that we pray. Amen. Amen. So the very first thing that Jesus shows us when he begins to teach his disciples how to pray is that the object of our prayer matters a great deal.

[4 : 45] The one to whom we pray matters a great deal. Jesus says, pray like this. Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

And what this shows us is that prayer is inherently relational. It's about a relationship with a being outside of ourselves. I know some of us pray as a way to relax, a kind of form of meditation.

Some of us pray in the hopes that we might transcend our state of consciousness or have a kind of mystical experience. And I wouldn't say that these are altogether wrong, but they're not what Jesus means when he talks about prayer.

Jesus means having a relationship with a being outside of ourselves. And it's a very specific kind of relationship with a very specific kind of being. In other words, praying like Jesus means being able to come to the God of the universe and call him Father.

Call him Father. Now, that doesn't strike us because we're so familiar with this prayer. It's probably one of the most familiar prayers in the world. But it should be earth-shattering if we understood it correctly.

[5 : 58] And here's how J.I. Packer puts it. He says, And listen to this.

He says, Father is the Christian name for God. Father is the Christian name for God. Now, before Jesus came, the Jews referred to God as Father.

And in a sense, what they meant was that God is the origin. He's the maker. He's the one who created all of this and all of us. He's the Father of the world. But Jesus takes it much further than that.

When Jesus prays to the Father, he regularly calls him Abba, which is a very intimate term. Some people refer to this as a very childish term, and that's not entirely true.

But it is a term of intimacy. It would be like calling someone Dad. It's a familial term. Now, you know, we have a bunch of neighborhood kids on our street, and they love to come over and play with our kids.

[7 : 13] And in a sense, I love all of those kids, and I want the best for all of those kids. But I'm not their dad. I'm not their dad. And only my kids get to call me Dad.

Only my kids get to wake me up in the middle of the night when they're scared. Even if it's 3 o'clock in the morning, they know I'm going to get up. Only my kids know that when they get sick, I'm going to clean everything up.

And I'll tell you right now, if one of these other kids gets sick around me, I'm calling their parents because I'm not their dad. But my kids know that I'm their dad. And if you could see more of my office, you would know that my office is filled with pictures of my kids.

And it's filled with all kinds of little drawings that my kids have done and cards that they've given me. And just the other day, I got this, and I don't think that you can see it very clearly, but it's a little picture of a bird.

And when you roll this flap of paper up and down, it makes it look as though the bird is flapping its wings and tweeting. And it's just a little thing. It probably took about five minutes to make.

[8 : 19] And if another kid had made this and given it to me, I would have said, Oh, that's really nice. And honestly, I probably would have tossed it. But my son made this for me. And because he made it and because he gave it to me, I'm keeping it forever.

I think it's an invaluable treasure. And so it's got a place of honor right here in my office. And the thing that we need to understand is that this is the kind of relationship that Jesus talks about having with God.

God is our dad. You know, for me, that has deep meaning. If I could be totally honest, I probably wouldn't be willing to die for most of my friends. But when it comes to one of my kids, no hesitation. I would lay down in traffic for them in a minute because I'm their dad. And Jesus says this is the kind of relationship that God wants to have with his children.

So this is a pretty amazing thing that Jesus shows us. And it has some implications, you know. You should spend some time thinking about if and when you pray, what is the object of your prayer?

[9 : 25] To whom are you praying when you pray? Maybe you're sending positive energy or positive thoughts out into the universe, hoping that this kind of impersonal universal force responds with something good in your life.

There are a lot of New Age philosophies and some Eastern religions operate that way. Or maybe you are trying to gain the favor of a being who is more like a king to you or more like a master to you.

And maybe you're trying to get that being to whom you pray to bless you by showing how devoted you are. And that's very common among many of the religions of the world.

But what Jesus is saying is radically different. Jesus makes it possible for prayer to be a way for us to climb into the arms of our dad. A dad who loves us.

A dad who is crazy about us. A dad who hangs our picture on the wall because he delights in nothing more than looking at our faces. So the first point is this.

[10 : 30] Not all prayer is the same. It's not interchangeable. The object of your prayer matters a great deal. But there's a problem with this that we need to resolve.

The problem with prayer is this. It's not as simple as using the word father when you pray. God created everyone. And so in a sense, God is the father and the origin and the maker of everyone. But not everyone gets to call him dad. Just like not every kid on the street gets to call you or I mom or dad. There's a particular relationship that Jesus has in mind.

And not everyone has it automatically. The Bible says that our core problem, the core problem in the world, the problem under all of the problems and all of the social ills and all of the challenges that we face in society, the core problem is that all human beings start out life as spiritual orphans. We are orphans, spiritually speaking. And what I mean by that is that we start out living life in the world that God made without really knowing that God, without having any kind of relationship with that God.

[11 : 43] And this is not because God ever abandoned us. It's because our first parents made the decision to abandon God. And as a result of that, we come into the world as spiritual orphans.

And I want to make it clear that being a spiritual orphan has nothing to do with whether or not you are a religious or irreligious person. Because there are a lot of people that grow up going to church all their lives.

They're very pious people, very devoted people, who nevertheless don't really know what it means to have God as a father, as a dad, as someone into whose arms they can crawl in the middle of the night.

They've never had that kind of relationship with God. And so they're living like spiritual orphans. The clearest evidence that you're a spiritual orphan, if you want to take a look and think about your own life, the clearest evidence that someone is a spiritual orphan is that they are regularly looking for sources.

They're looking to other sources to find things that only their heavenly father can give them. They're going elsewhere and trying to find, in a sense, substitute dads.

[12 : 50] And what are the things that we look to our heavenly father to give us? Well, things like a sense of worth or value, a sense that we are ultimately loved, a sense that we are safe and that things will ultimately turn out okay one day, are these deep existential longings.

And so there are many people who are spiritual orphans who go about trying to find a sense of worth by looking to their jobs. or by looking to their accomplishments. Or by looking to their looks. Or by looking to their children and their ability as parents. And that's their source of worth in the world. There are people who are desperately longing to feel loved.

And so they look to the attention or approval of the people that they respect so that they can feel loved. There are people who desperately desire to feel safe.

And so they try to meet that need by trying to control every aspect of their lives that they can. And the problem with all of these things, the problem with going to these other sources to try to get these needs met, is what Paul says in Galatians 4, verse 8.

[14 : 04] He says, So he's talking about these other sources.

And he's saying, you're enslaved to these sources. Whatever you look to to give you things only your Heavenly Father can give you will end up being your God. And it will end up enslaving you. And so to paraphrase David Foster Wallace, if success is your God, then you're always going to feel like a failure. It's never going to be enough. If being beautiful and attractive, if that's your God, if

that's the substitute that you go to to get that need met, then you're always going to feel ugly. And you're always going to worry that other people are more attractive than you. If being a perfect parent is your God, if you say, the one thing that makes me get up and go in the morning is that I'm going to be a perfect parent, if that's your God, then you're always going to feel like a failure. You're always going to notice the ways that you're falling short. These things cannot meet these needs in us because, as Paul says, by nature, they are not gods.

[15:15] By design, they cannot meet these needs. Only our Heavenly Father can meet these needs. There was an NPR interview with Paul McCartney that I saved some years ago.

Paul McCartney, of course, is one of the great musicians of our era, one of the greatest of our era. And he admits in this interview that he feels threatened when some other young musician comes out with a hit, that he gets threatened by other musicians' success.

And the interviewer is utterly incredulous. He said, how could the great Paul McCartney with just accolades and awards, just stacks of awards in his house? How could you ever be threatened by anybody?

And McCartney replies, he says, unfortunately, yeah. I should be able to look at my accolades and go, come on, Paul, that's enough. But there's still this little voice in the back of my brain that goes, no, no, no.

You could do better. This person over here is excelling. You need to try harder. And that little voice, that little voice that I know some of us have heard in our own lives, that is the voice of slavery.

[16:23] That's the voice of slavery. It's never enough. So to tie all this back to the Lord's Prayer, Jesus prays, our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

And to hallow something, to hallow our Heavenly Father's name, means we make that the reason for our life. That's the thing that we live for. That's the source of our worth and our love and our safety and all of these things that we need.

That's what it means to hallow God's name. But here's the point I want you to see. If we don't hallow our Heavenly Father, if we don't make that the thing that we live for and the source of all of our worth and love and identity, then we're going to end up hallowing something else.

And so the question is not, what do you hallow? What do you make holy in your life? Or whether or not you do that with God. The question is, what are you doing it with? Because everybody hallows something.

Everybody lives for something. So what's the answer to this problem? Right? If Jesus teaches us that the object of our prayer should be our Heavenly Father, our Dad, and yet the problem with that is that we find ourselves in the world as spiritual orphans.

[17:36] We don't have that kind of relationship with Dad. And as a result, we've gone to all of these other substitutes, these other sources that can't ever live up to the demands that we place on that, that end up enslaving us.

How do we resolve all of this? And of course, the answer is, we need a Father in Heaven. And we need to hallow His name above all others.

And this is, of course, the entire point of the Gospel. This is the entire reason that Jesus came. Here's what Paul says in Galatians 4, beginning in verse 4, he says, But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law so that we might receive adoption as sons.

And because you're sons, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, Abba, Father, crying, Dad. So you're no longer a slave, but a son.

And if a son, then an heir through God. Now, I know that there's a lot of gender-specific language here around fathers and sons, and it may sound like Paul is being very gender-specific, but it's in fact the opposite.

[18:46] I want you to understand what Paul's actually saying here. It's pretty radical. In Rome, adoption was very common. It was very common among the upper classes, especially among senators.

Because in Roman society, succession was very important. Passing on your land or your estate and all of that to an heir, that was very important. And so what did you do if you didn't have a firstborn male heir who could be your successor?

Well, one of the easiest ways to resolve that was to adopt. You would go out and you would find some young, promising man of worth and you would legally adopt him, make him your firstborn son,

and then make him the heir of your estate.

And this happened all of the time among the upper classes. But of course, it only ever applied largely to people who were in the upper class and it only ever applied to men. Rarely, if ever, do we have accounts of women being adopted.

And Paul is saying precisely the opposite when it comes to God. What Paul says is that God's desire to adopt us has nothing to do with gender.

[19 : 52] It has nothing to do with race. It has nothing to do with our socioeconomic class. It has nothing to do with our worth. It has nothing to do with our moral excellence. It has nothing to do with any way that we've proved ourselves.

It has nothing to do with any of that. God's desire to adopt you as his child is based purely on the fact that he loves you. At some point, when you had no idea God was there, God was looking at you and he was saying, I want to be your dad.

I want you to be my child. That is the reason that God sent Jesus Christ into the world. God sent us and in order to make our adoption possible, God first has to redeem us and to redeem someone means to pay the price in order to purchase their freedom.

You would redeem slaves by buying their freedom. So God has to purchase our freedom and free us from the things that we've become enslaved to, these substitute gods, these substitute heavenly fathers.

And so, that's exactly why Jesus came. Jesus is the only true son of God, the only begotten son.

And of course, the gospel tells us that Jesus came as God's one and only son, the true heir to everything, and that Jesus took our place, that he lived the life that we should have lived but have not.

[21 : 28] And then he died the death that we deserve to die. And because Jesus did that, he takes our place so that we can take his place as children.

And as Paul says, sons, firstborn sons, and heirs in the kingdom. This is the truth of the gospel. And so, the only way to go from being an orphan to being a slave to these spiritual substitutes that we have gone to, the only way to gain this new identity is through faith in Jesus Christ.

Asking God, on the basis of what Jesus has done for us, to forgive us and then to redeem us and then to adopt us and to make us co-heirs with Christ.

We are the brothers and sisters of Jesus and we have all of the rights and privileges in the kingdom that he has. And that is what gives us the right to call God Father. That's what gives us the privilege of climbing into the arms of our dad in the middle of the night when we pray.

Now, to bring all this together, why are we talking about all of this in the middle of a global pandemic? And I'll just give you a couple of reasons to close. Number one is this. Times of crisis often reveal the things that we most hallow in our lives, our substitute gods.

[22 : 58] Now, I'm not trying to minimize or make light of suffering. I know that there's much real suffering in the world. I know that there are people in our parish who have tested positive for coronavirus.

I know that people are facing all kinds of financial stress and ruin and businesses are closing and people are struggling in their jobs. And I know all of that is going on and some of you are feeling isolated and alone.

Some of you are in households where you're struggling relationally with the people that you're with. You're struggling to love and be patient with your kids. I know all of these things are true. And I know that there is a kind of existential dread all around us right now and this is a test of endurance for many of us.

But listen, it is often in these times of crisis when we begin to see clearly the things that we most hallow, our idols, our substitute gods, because it's only when these things are taken away from us that we realize how much value we put in them.

And so even in the midst of this tragedy and this crisis, this is also an opportunity to see our hearts more clearly. And if you see substitute gods, if you see things that you're going to for worth or identity or meaning or love or security that are not God, then understand this, they can never deliver on their promises.

[24 : 19] They will only ever enslave you and let you down. And this is an opportunity for you to rid yourself of these things once and for all. So times of crisis reveal the things we most hallow.

The second reason I think this is relevant right now is because in times of crisis, we need to be able to pray with assurance. In other words, we need to be able to pray knowing that there's someone out there who is listening to us, who cares about us and loves us.

And that's precisely what this prayer is meant to offer us. If you know that the God of the universe, the God of the heavens and the earth is your dad, then you know when you pray, every time you pray, then you're climbing into his arms.

You know that your prayers are like these drawings, that he delights when we come to him in prayer. So to speak, he puts our prayers in his office because they're treasures to him.

Then that's how he feels about his children. So you can have the assurance of knowing that when you pray, that's how God responds. And the times where God doesn't give you what you want, the times that God doesn't answer your prayer, it doesn't mean that he doesn't hear you.

[25 : 30] It doesn't mean that he doesn't love you. It simply means that he's your parent. And there are times when he has to say no. There are times when he has to give us something other than what we've asked for, but that that pains him.

And that God, because he's your dad, wants more than anything for you to be flourishing. But you have that kind of assurance of knowing no matter what, God is there.

And so the invitation is this, this first week. Come to Jesus Christ and you will find the assurance that you need. You'll find all the assurance that you need as you pray.

And then pray these words and know the truth of them. Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Let's pray. God, we thank you for your word and we thank you for the words of this prayer.

And I pray that as we pray them over the course of this day and this week, that the truth of these words would become more and more embedded in our hearts. Lord, that we would begin to discover the depth and the meaning of what it is to be your children.

[26 : 39] And that each word and each phrase we would appreciate the extent to which the lengths that you went to to make it possible for us to call you Father.

That is no mere word that you purchased that for us at great cost to yourself. And I pray that we would feel the love in that, Lord. And I pray this for our good and for your glory in your Son's name. Amen.