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Luke 11:1–4

36th Message

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TEACH US TO PRAY

SERIES: GOSPEL OF LUKE

Last week we saw that hospitality was one of Luke's major themes as Jesus embarked his final journey to Jerusalem. Having faced rejection in Samaria, Jesus was finally welcomed into a home in Bethany by a woman named Martha. But it was her younger sister, Mary, who upstaged her and became an icon of authentic hospitality. Forsaking countless distractions and less important things, Mary focused on the most important thing—listening to the words of her guest. As such Mary was elevated to the status of a disciple, a calling that supersedes all others. Today Luke moves from the theme of hospitality—listening to and receiving God's words—to its counterpoint, prayer—speaking our words to God. So how do we carry on a conversation with the Holy?

My first experience of prayer occurred at the age of eleven. I was watching the 1954 movie classic, *The High and Mighty*, starring John Wayne. Wayne was cast in the role of a co-pilot, who was flying a crippled plane from Honolulu to San Francisco. In typical John Wayne fashion, though all the passengers and crew were paralyzed by fear, the Duke remained calm and steady. But as the plane made its final descent, with runway lights in the distance and the fuel gauge on "empty," I noticed that his countenance changed. His voice dropped and in solemn tones he recited the first line of the famous childhood prayer, "Now I lay me down to sleep ..." I thought to myself, *if John Wayne prays, then I should pray!* I went to bed that night and made up a simple framework for my prayers and recited them every night.

But as I grew into adolescence and young adulthood, I discovered my framework wasn't adequate to address the new and difficult challenges I encountered. So with each new challenge my prayers morphed into something new. I needed a new framework that would allow me to articulate what was going on inside me and give me confidence that I was actually connecting with the God of the universe. Without authenticity and confidence prayer becomes a dead ritual or phony religious game.

Today in Luke's gospel we find the disciples in a similar situation. Luke sets the scene with Jesus "praying in a certain place" and his disciples looking on.

Now Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." (Luke 11:1 ESV)

Observing Jesus, the disciples are keenly aware that a sacred conversation is occurring—an intimate, holy dialogue so different than the fixed prayers they experienced in the synagogue; a dialogue so inviting they long to enter in, but so holy they dare not intrude. After waiting patiently for Jesus to finish his prayer they give voice to their request, "Teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples."

There is a sense of urgency in their request. John taught his disciples to pray in preparation for the arrival of the kingdom of God. Now that the King has come his disciples are following him

into a hornets' nest where they will witness the climatic confrontation between God's kingdom and the forces of darkness. The journey will confront them with new challenges that will test their faith like nothing before. No wonder they want to make sure they are adequately prepared and know how to pray to withstand the dangers that lie ahead.

And he said to them,

"When you pray, say:

'Father, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

Give us each day our daily bread,

and forgive us our sins,

for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us.

And lead us not into temptation." (Luke 11:2–4)

We know these verses as the "Lord's Prayer." However, as Darrell Bock suggests, it would be more appropriate if we called it the "Disciples' Prayer,"¹ for it is designed for the community of Jesus' disciples, who are making their kingdom-journey with Jesus. It is not a list of random petitions, but a simple yet profound framework of key essentials that will keep the disciples grounded in their prayers throughout their spiritual pilgrimage. Tom Wright suggests that "Jesus intended his sequence of thought to act more like a scaffolding than the whole building."² The fact that the prayer is extremely short makes it easy to memorize for pilgrims, who must travel light and don't have the luxury of taking more than one carryon for luggage.

The prayer consists of five petitions: the first two affirm God's power and glory, and the last three seek God's provision of food, forgiveness and protection. We might think of them as paragraph headings, or bullets, from which the disciples can develop to fit to their personal situations. Here are the essential themes we must consider when we pray:

1. **Who's who?** To whom are we praying, and what role do we have to play?
2. **What's the big picture?** What is the ultimate goal of our prayers?
3. **What provisions do we need for the journey?**
4. **If this prayer is only the scaffolding, how do we build the house?**

I. Who's Who?

Father, hallowed be your name.

Our first task in prayer is to get outside of ourselves and open our minds and hearts to the glory of the one to whom we pray. Before we even consider forming a petition on our lips, we need to take time to consider the One who made us and loves us. The tone of the entire prayer is set with the opening word, "Father." It is one of the great mysteries of God's being, that the Creator of the universe, who is so

totally other, utterly beyond us, transcendent and unassailable can be so personal, compassionate and intimate with us at the same time.

Israel first experienced God's fatherly compassion when he bared his holy arm and liberated them from slavery after centuries of bondage in Egypt, to demonstrate that "Israel is my firstborn son" (Exod 4:22). And so whenever God was invoked as "Father," the memory of God exercising all the powers of creation to liberate his people in the Exodus was clearly in view.

Later in Israel's history the title "son of God" was given by God to king David and his sons (2 Sam 7:12-16). When David's sons took their oath of office, they would recite Psalm 2:7-8, God's decree of adoption that bound God's loyal-love to the king like a father to a son (2 Sam 7:14). The decree concludes with an invitation to the king to take full advantage of this privileged relationship by means of prayer, for once the covenant was in place, God had a legal obligation to save the king and to extend his rule over all the nations (Psalm 2:7-8). Prayer was to be the king's primary means of bringing God's rule from heaven to earth.

I will tell of the decree:

**The LORD said to me, "You are my Son,
today I have begotten you.**

**Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,
and the ends of the earth your possession. (Ps 2:7-8)**

Because we are in Christ, we share in his powerful reign and are therefore adopted as *sons* (i.e. kings, both male and female) with all the privileges of access to the Father. Such compassion evokes awe, allegiance and devotion to God that his name, which is his character, his reputation and very person will be held in high honor everywhere.

II. The Big Picture: What is the Goal of Prayer?

Your kingdom come.

The ultimate goal of our prayers should be that God's rule, the kingdom of heaven, become fully present on earth in all its justice, beauty, love and holiness. In the closing doxology of the Jewish prayer service, known as the *Kaddish* ("holy"), the petition to exalt God's name was immediately followed by the petition that God's kingdom might come in the lifetime of those who were worshipping.

May he establish His Kingdom
and may His salvation blossom and His anointed be near
during your lifetime and during your days
and during the lifetimes of all the House of Israel,
speedily and very soon!³

The disciples were privileged to be the first to witness the answer to that prayer, as Jesus came to announce and inaugurate the kingdom. As the prophets predicted, it would be a brand new Exodus. Tom Wright elaborates on the theme:

Jesus was on the way to Jerusalem, to act on behalf of *God's name*, which had been dragged in the mud as his people had turned away from him in rebellion. He was on the way to accomplish the 'Exodus' in which the long-awaited kingdom of God would become a reality. He had provided *bread* for the journey, and "the breaking of bread" was to become the sign of his presence in the church...He was already offering *forgiveness*, and would accomplish it completely in his death...and he was *waging war against the powers of evil*, a war that would reach its decisive battle on Calvary.⁴

Israel's Exodus becomes the paradigm for salvation history. Just as God delivered his people from oppression by means of ten plagues that decimated Egyptian idols, today he is rescuing a people from all the nations by bringing judgment on the idolatry that is the foundation of our modern world. Now that the Messiah has come and the door to the kingdom has swung wide open, Paul exhorts Timothy to train the believers in Ephesus to become loving intercessors, instruments through whom God's love is poured out into the world.

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. (1 Tim 2:1, 3-4)

For fourteen months Aleppo, Syria's largest city of 2 million people, has been under siege by rebel forces hoping to topple the government of Bashar-al-Assad. For the past three months the rebels have imposed a blockade on the city, which has cut off Aleppo's citizens from the outside world. The results are devastating. Mindy Belz of World Magazine writes:

Water, electricity, and communication are cut off, infrastructure has collapsed, and residents cannot leave, nor can aid be brought in. For Aleppo residents, all necessities of life are in short supply and prices have soared. A bag of lentils that only a year ago cost 50 Syrian pounds, or about \$1, now may cost anywhere from \$5 to \$10. Because of shortages and the exorbitant cost, churches—one in Aleppo was providing meals for 35,000 displaced Syrians only a few months ago—have been forced to halt help for the needy... the humanitarian crisis they have created will make anyone wonder what kind of government the opposition forces might deliver were they to successfully replace Assad.⁵

For my friend Nerses, an Armenian pastor, the war is personal. He was born in Aleppo. It took him a month to make telephone contact with his family, friends and fellow pastors. Cut off from the world, they are trying to survive in the midst of mortar fire, no food or fuel and the fear of extremists. After insurgents take control of new neighborhoods they tear down the crosses of churches. Many Armenians have been kidnapped trying to leave the country. But they continue to resist. One of the pastors said that two weeks ago their church proudly celebrated the graduation of their high school seniors. Last Friday a mortar struck the building next to the church. Shrapnel from the explosion hit the roof of the church and made fourteen holes in the ceiling. The pastor thought, "Who is going to come to church now with holes in the roof?" To his utter surprise, the following Sunday the church was packed. When the foundations of the world begin to shake, where else can people go? As Paul exhorts us, let us pray for Aleppo, that the Christians can once again live their lives in peace and dignity and that many will be saved.

III. Provisions for the Journey (Luke 11:3)

A. God Our Provider

Give us each day our daily bread.

The first personal request is for our daily provision of food. A soldier cannot march or do battle for his commander without his daily rations, and a disciple puts his trust in a generous Creator God for his daily needs. Throughout salvation history God has proven

to be a faithful provider, even in the desert. But the provision goes beyond mere physical food.

The expression “daily (Greek: *episousion*) bread” is ambiguous and suggests more than one meaning. It can mean “necessary” or “daily” bread, suggesting we should pray for just what we need each day and not worry about tomorrow. But it can also mean bread “for the coming” day or age. Given God’s explanation to Israel on the significance of the manna (Deut 8:3) and Jesus’ teachings about the significance of his miraculous feedings, I suspect that the ambiguity is deliberate. God demonstrates his generosity and faithfulness to us not merely by supplying bread for each day’s needs, but that the gift of bread becomes a foretaste of the bread of life that comes down from heaven, granting eternal life (John 6:50–51).

B. God Our Redeemer

And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us.

The second divine provision that is indispensable for our journey is our need for mercy in the form of forgiveness. In Psalm 103 David exalts God for his unconditional mercy:

**He does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.
For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;
as far as the east is from the west,
so far does he remove our transgressions from us.
(Ps 103:10–12)**

The basis for the request to be forgiven lies in the forgiveness we freely extend to others with no exception. As John Carroll observes, “Those who seek divine mercy in the form of forgiveness of sins must be in the business of debt cancellation.”⁶ This does not mean that by forgiving others we earn our salvation. But it does mean if we refuse to extend mercy to others, it is a sign we haven’t yet experienced forgiveness for our sins. To receive God’s forgiveness is life-changing to the core. In his book *What Is So Amazing About Grace*, Philip Yancey writes:

Walter Wink tells of two peacemakers who visited a group of Polish Christians ten years after the end of World War II. “Would you be willing to meet with other Christians from West Germany?” the peacemakers asked. “They want to ask forgiveness for what Germany did to Poland during the war and to begin to build a new relationship.”

At first there was silence. Then one Pole spoke up. “What you are asking is impossible. Each stone of Warsaw is soaked in Polish blood! We cannot forgive!”

Before the group parted, however, they said the Lord’s Prayer together. When they reached the words “forgive us our sins as we forgive . . .,” everyone stopped praying. Tension swelled in the room.

The Pole who had spoken so vehemently said, “I must say yes to you. I could no more pray the Our Father, I could no longer call myself a Christian, if I refuse to forgive. Humanly speaking, I cannot do it, but God will give us his strength!” Eighteen months later the Polish and West German Christians met together in Vienna, establishing friendships that continue to this day.⁷

C. God our Protector

And lead us not into temptation.

Bock writes that the term *peirasmon* (“temptation, testing”) “may refer to trial and the character to not succumb to it, or it may refer to temptation and thus seduction into sin.”⁸ Our final petition is not a request to get a “free pass” from testing, but rather to be protected from being overwhelmed by the temptation it produces, and thus to succumb to the power of sin in our lives. Jesus himself, at the climax of his journey, faced severe temptation that tested his integrity and commitment to his vocation as Son of God to the core. Though he asked to be spared of the “cup,” it was not God’s will to do so. But as he persevered in prayer, he was strengthened and delivered from the power of evil. Similarly Jesus told Simon Peter that Satan would test him severely, but because of Jesus’ intercession for him, his faith would not fail, and that the test would serve to strengthen his brothers (Luke 22:31–32).

Besides the constant need we have for God’s provision and mercy, we also need his divine protection. One of David’s favorite metaphors to depict God’s protective care for us is the “shield” (*magen*). It occurs twenty times in the Psalms. Bruce Waltke writes:

[The] *shield (magen)* is a round, light shield, made of wood or wicker and covered with thick leather rubbed with oil (cf. Isa 21:5) to preserve it and to make it glisten. It is carried by the light infantry to ward off the enemy’s sword, spear or arrows; and frequently employed to describe God’s presence in warding off a foe’s attack.⁹

After thirteen years of being relentlessly pursued by a demonized Saul, David uses the metaphor of the shield three times in Psalm 18 (vv. 2, 30, 35). Do you ever reflect on your past and consider how faithful God has been to be your personal protector? It’s almost too much to consider. Not long ago I discovered a new nuance to the image in Psalm 7:10, a verse that has stumped translators due to an unusual preposition. In Hebrew the first line of the verse reads simply – *my shield / upon / God*. Most English versions translate the preposition (*’al*) as “with,” rendering the line, “My shield is with God,” which makes little sense. Bruce Waltke, however, giving full weight to the meaning of the preposition, translates the phrase “God takes it upon himself to be my shield.”

The circumlocution *God takes it upon himself to be* (*’al*, literally “is upon God”) aims to unravel a terse use of the preposition *’al* (“upon”), which has no one word equivalent in English. “With,” found in many English versions, misses the thought. *’al* here signifies that God feels the burden to be David’s shield.¹⁰

The thought that God “feels the burden” and “takes it upon himself to be my shield,” moved me to tears.

In summary, Jesus gives his disciples a framework of five petitions that reflect God’s priorities for our prayers:

God’s honor	Father, hallowed be your name.
God’s rule	Your kingdom come.
Bread of life	Give us each day our daily bread,
Mercy we receive and give	and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us.
Spiritual protection	And lead us not into temptation.” (Luke 11:1–4)

IV. The Invitation to Graduate School

If the “Disciple’s Prayer” is the scaffold, what’s the building? Where do we go from here? Do we just keep repeating the Lord’s

Prayer over and over again? It's certainly profitable, but you won't grow many "prayer muscles." And did you ever wonder why we don't have more of Jesus' prayers recorded? The answer is, I think we do. They are found in Israel's great prayer book, the Psalms. The Psalms are the building. N. T. Wright in his most recent book, *The Case for the Psalms*, makes the point that "Psalter forms the great epic poem of the creator and covenant God who will at last visit and redeem his people and, with them, his whole creation."¹¹ As you traverse through all five books of the Psalter, you will see this simple framework of prayer hold up through the tortuous rigors of betrayal (Psalm 3), abandonment (Psalm 44), despair (Psalm 88), apostate leadership (Psalm 4), exile (Psalm 102), and even murder (Psalm 51). The psalms are a treasure, a thousand years of authentic voices, prayers inspired by the "Spirit of the LORD" (2 Sam 23:2). It is as if the script has already been written for us. And what is even more remarkable is that Jesus found them sufficient to give voice to everything he endured. For two decades I've been challenging everyone I know to take the journey. Karen Downing took up the challenge and will share with us where that challenge led her:

Karen:

Class started on January 3 with ten of us hovering over steaming cups of coffee, tentatively beginning the journey that Brian called "Climbing with the Psalms." His dominant metaphor was of ascending a mountain, step by deliberate step, to reach ever-new and ever-higher vistas from which we see the topography of our lives and the kingdom work that God was accomplishing in us and, as far as the eye could see, in the world.

I was in heaven.

For 12 weeks I read the Psalms and studied Samuel and I wrote and wrote and wrote. I wrote a lot of bad poetry. I wrote some good poetry. But most importantly, I discovered a place of rare intimacy with God. As it turned out, God wasn't a literary critic, He just wanted me to talk to Him honestly, no posturing or posing. This is harder than it sounds, or at least it is for me; I am incredibly adept at subterfuge. But God wanted the Good, the Bad and Ugly. He wanted to bear witness to my life and He wanted me to bear witness to His.

As the class progressed, I discovered my own voice in a fresh, authentic way. David's spectacular poetry modeled for me how to talk with God, how to tell him everything that was rolling around inside me and how to listen for what He might want to say to me. The Psalms led me to Job and Jonathan, Hannah, Abigail and Tamar. They taught me how to ruthlessly confess my sin, how to bring everything I am ashamed of to the foot of the cross. The Psalms brought me every single day to Jesus. They explained where God was during an agonizing season of my life when for all I knew God was nowhere to be found. They helped me bury a friend.

At the end of the course, the rabbi challenged us to spend fourteen days in the Psalms. Every day our task was to read a psalm, unpack it and then pray and write ourselves into the presence of God.

Being the uptight, non-procrastinating student that I am, I started the very next day, and I started with Psalm 1 because I didn't want to be in charge of how the process went. I'm a certifiable control freak, so I intentionally go out of my way to relinquish control to God

in laughably practical ways, and this was one of them. I figured I'd give it two weeks, just so I could tell the rabbi I did the assignment. Maybe he'd give me a gold star.

Nine months and 40 poems later, I sat down at my computer and poured out *YHWH In the Psalms*, the title of my poem for Psalm 41, the last psalm in the first of five books of the Psalter. Almost everything I thought I knew about God has been challenged, deepened or altered in some fundamental way. It was the most extraordinary experience I have ever had, and even now there are things I can't quite wrap my head around—transcendent moments that from a distance make me doubt they were real, except that I have 41 poems to bring me back to those moments. Like David in Psalm 34 and 1 Samuel 21,

*"the sword surrendered
in the Valley of Elah rests
in my hands a memory so real
I cannot be mad."*

1. This is Bock's observation. Darrell L. Bock, *Luke, Volume 2:9:51-24:53* (ECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 1064.
2. N. T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 58.
3. "Kaddish," *Wikipedia*.
4. N. T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 135.
- 5., Mindy Belz, "A Letter from Aleppo," www.worldmag.com/2013/09/a_letter_from_aleppo/page1.
6. John T. Carroll, *Luke, A Commentary* (NTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 250.
7. Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 123.
8. Bock, *Luke*, 1055-1056.
9. Bruce K. Waltke, *The Psalms as Christian Lament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, forthcoming).
10. "The preposition 'al "upon" requires an appropriate verb of motion, such as "take." The preposition marks a burden or duty that the subject feels with pathos as "upon" him." Waltke, *The Psalms as Christian Lament* (forthcoming).
11. N. T. Wright, *The Case for the Psalms, Why They Are Essential* (New York: Harper One, 2013), 33.

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