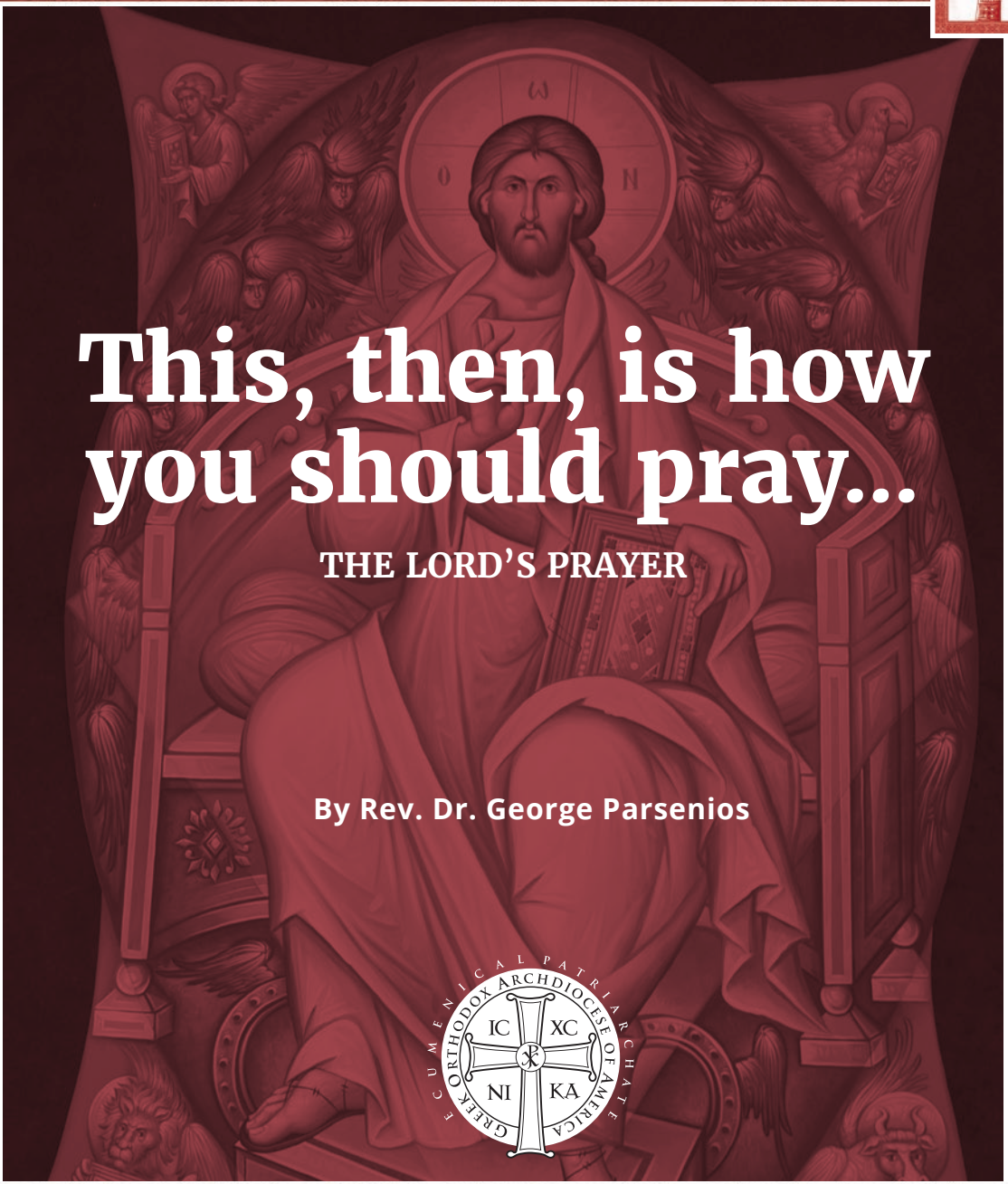
PRAYER & SPIRITUAL LIFE



This, then, is how you should pray...

THE LORD'S PRAYER

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Orthodox Christianity **Faith & Life** Series



Why is this called "the Lord's Prayer"? It was given to us by Jesus, the Lord. The Old Testament associates the name "Lord" with the one God of Israel (Deuteronomy 6:4), and New Testament authors apply the title "Lord" to Jesus in order to proclaim his divine identity. Paul says that every tongue should confess that *"Jesus is Lord"* (Philippians 2:11) and Thomas calls Jesus *"my Lord and my God"* (John 20:28). The Lord's Prayer appears in Matthew 6:9–13 and Luke 11:2–4. The version in Matthew is better known, and is also the one used in the prayer life of the Church. This brief exposition will proceed, therefore, verse by verse through Matthew's version.

"Our Father, who art in heaven."

The Lord's Prayer is not addressed to "my" but to "our" Father. Individual Christians are not lone believers who have "personal relationships" with "my" God. True fellowship with God requires fellowship with other true believers (1 John 1:3–4). Tertullian makes the matter plain when he says, *"We cannot call God our Father unless we call the Church our Mother."*

The Father is "in heaven." The entire Lord's Prayer can be read in light of this phrase. If the Father is "in heaven," the dominant concern of the Lord's Prayer is that God's will "be done on earth as it is in heaven." We look forward to that future day when Christ will return, making all things new. The Lord's Prayer is defined by this future hope in two related ways. Some parts of the prayer call for Christ to return quickly and for God to complete his work in the world. Other petitions focus on the time up until Christ comes, praying for glimpses of heavenly life even now on earth. These twin concerns—the heavenly future and the earthly present—lie behind even those phrases that seem concerned with other things, like the next petition,

"Hallowed be thy name."

Asking God to make his name hallowed, or holy (***agiasthêtô***), is specifically a call for God to renew the world. In Ezekiel 36:23, God complains that his name has been profaned among the nations and that Israel has caused his name to be derided and mocked. When he promises to correct the errors of all humanity, God says, *"I will hallow (**agiasô**) my name."* Praying for God's name to be "hallowed" will thus lead us also to pray the next petition:

"Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

"Give us this day our daily bread."

As St. Cyprian notes, this verse can support several literal and spiritual interpretations. In one sense, the petition reminds us how to live as we await the return of Christ. If our focus is on the arrival of God's heavenly reign, we cannot be anxious about life on earth. Jesus says, *"Do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we wear?'...Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and these things will be given to you as well"* (Matthew 6:31–33). We thus request only enough bread for "this day." From another perspective, life in heaven is often characterized as a great banquet (Matthew 22:1–14). Praying for bread, in this sense, is equivalent to praying for Christ to return, in order that we might enjoy this heavenly banquet now, on "this day." From yet another perspective, Jesus tells us that he is himself the *"bread of life"* (John 6:51) which we share when we partake of the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist (John 6:53). To ask for daily bread in this sense is to pray to be worthy of regular participation in the Eucharist.

"And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

The parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18:23–35 provides a clear illustration of this petition. A servant begged his master to forgive him the enormous debt he had run up, but that same servant refused to forgive his fellow servant a paltry sum. The parable concludes with the admonition that God's forgiveness is possible only if *"you forgive your brother from your heart."* If we are to enjoy God's forgiveness in the future, *"when the master returns,"* we must forgive one another in the present (see also Matthew 5:21–26).

"Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

The word translated here as "temptation" is the Greek word ***peirasmos***. The term appears in the New Testament to describe many types of temptation, but it also appears in biblical passages that describe the temptations awaiting the faithful in the last days, when even believers will be hard-pressed to renounce or ignore their faith. God will support the faithful in the midst of such temptations. Revelation 3:10 says, *"I will preserve you from the hour of temptation (**peirasmos**)."* We should not imagine, though, that such temptation lies only in the future. In Christ, the kingdom of heaven has already drawn near (Matthew 3:10). We are already in the time of trial, already tempted to fall away, and we beg for God to deliver us from this trial. In the midst of such struggles Christ remains our savior, as he says, *"In this world, you will have trouble. But take heart. I have overcome the world"* (John 16:33).

The Lord's Prayer reminds us that the present world is not our final home. We are citizens of a heavenly commonwealth (Philippians 3:20) and we must live here and now in the light of our heavenly future. Such an approach to life meets with necessary struggles, but we do not toil alone. The same Lord who gave us this prayer also promised, *"I am with you always, to the close of the age"* (Matthew 28:20). Amen! ✠

Bibliographic Note:

This article has made extensive use of the following two works. Those interested in further reading should consult them: Dale Allison, The Sermon on the Mount: Inspiring the Moral Imagination (Crossroad, 1999); Alistair Stewart-Sykes, (transl.) Tertullian, Cyprian and Origen on the Lord's Prayer (St. Vladimir's Press, 2004).



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