



Let's start at the very beginning
 A very good place to start
 When you read you begin with A B C

When you pray you begin with "Our Father which art...."

Or at least you did when I was a kid. I never did understand that line *our Father which art in heaven*. Why was it necessary to know that God was a painter? What was He drawing anyway? Or was He described as an artist because of all His works in creation?

During the 1960s there was the first **major** revision of the church prayer book, and the Lord's Prayer came out as *our Father who art in heaven*. Must have taken them ages to agree on that huge change. And then, in the nineties, they changed it again to just *our Father in heaven*. Maybe He's given up painting.....

Whichever of those versions we are most familiar with, the chances are we just rattle it off by heart whenever we say it, without looking at it and thinking through what it says. During the summer of 2001 the senior TFG group looked deeply at this prayer, and these are some of our thoughts. Hopefully they will be of help to you too. I am going to take the version as found in the Church of England's new *Common Worship* book, which is

*Our Father in heaven
 Hallowed be Your Name
 Your Kingdom Come
 Your will be done
 On earth as it is in heaven.
 Give us today our daily bread.
 Forgive us our sins
 As we forgive those who sin against us.
 Lead us not into temptation,
 But deliver us from evil
 For the Kingdom, the Power and the Glory are Yours
 Now and forever.
 Amen.*

Our Father In Heaven

The opening phrase focuses us straight away on God the Father. If we have been bogged down with our problems then as we start to gaze at Him our problems are put into perspective. Compared to the 'bigness' of the Father they are tiny.

It's good to pause here, before we go on with the prayer. Let the Father fill your mind.





"Our"

But wait a minute, the words are "*Our* Father". Who is able to call him father? Anybody, or just certain people? Are we all His children? We also need to be clear about Who *He* is as well. Who are we praying to? If that is not clear at the beginning, the prayer is nothing more than babble. We are praying to 'Our Father'. Both those words are significant:

Is everybody part of the 'our', or is it only some people who can call God Father? During the funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales the tv screens showed people up and down the country joining in the Lord's Prayer. There is a sense in which all can, of course.

The Bible first introduces Him as the Creator, the whole universe exists because He made it, the earth is filled with His creatures (Psalm 104:24).

God is the Creator, and as such the first father of the whole human race. From Him we all come and, ultimately, to Him we will all return (Ecclesiastes 12:7). But Jesus is not using the name God in that sense in this prayer. He is talking about an intimacy with God, and the 'our' refers to those who have, or can have, such an intimacy.

So if 'Father' does not mean 'Creator of the whole human race', who is it that can be in an intimate relationship with God so that they can say 'Our Father'? John tells us in his gospel, chapter 1 verse 12. He is talking about Jesus, and he says

Yet to all who received Him, to those who believed in His name, he gave the right to become children of God.

Those who receive Jesus and who believe in Him (believe He is the Son of God), themselves become children of God.....and they can call God 'Our Father'. Jesus says later in John's gospel that in order for this to happen a person has to be born again; He was talking to Nicodemus in John chapter 3 and makes it clear He is not talking about a new physical birth but something spiritual. A person's spirit needs to be born, just as they were earlier born physically. Birth requires both a sperm and an egg, only when the egg receives the sperm does life begin. In the spiritual realm, only when we receive into our lives the Spirit of God does our spiritual life begin. Before that we are described as being dead.

Ephesians 2 says

As for you you were dead in your transgressions and sins in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world.....but because of His great love for us God....made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions.





The Lord's Prayer can only be prayed to the depth and power that Jesus intended by those who are children of God. Jesus as the 'oldest brother' of the children of God is teaching us how to pray.

But notice too that Jesus did not say 'My Father' but 'Our Father'. We are called not to a private, personal faith but to a public, shared one. It is together that we can pray Our Father. It is together that we live out our family life as His people. If He is our Father then we are sisters and brothers (the Bible just says brothers, counting all as male heirs regardless of their sex as it was the sons who stood to inherit their father's property). Our attitude towards each other then should be as loving brothers and sisters, setting an example to each other and to all those around us about how to live in God's way. In Romans 12:10 it says

Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honour one another above yourselves.

A fairly tall order, and almost impossible to obey....and we are just looking just at the first word of the Lord's Prayer still! What Jesus is doing is setting the context for the rest of the prayer. We are to remember that we are praying with all our brothers and sisters across the world even if at that moment we are physically alone.

Finally, it was Jesus who told us to pray "Our Father" along with Him. He is standing with us as we pray; He is praying with us. It says in Galatians 4:6,7 that

Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.

We are heirs of the Kingdom of Heaven along with Jesus! When we are praying "Our Father", along with Jesus, we are praying as those who have the right to enter into the Throneroom of God and stand in front of Him, not as cowering peasants but as his sons and heirs of the kingdom! Jesus said

"Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them." (Matthew 18:19, 20).

We see again that we are called to be in this together, together with Jesus but also together with each other. He calls us to pray together, and promises great things when two of His brothers or sisters get together with Him to pray....the Father not only listens but grants the request! That's not to say He won't if we pray on our own, of course, but it is another reminder how much God calls us to live out our faith together.





Some say "I don't need to go to church to be a Christian". Let's be clear about this. Jesus taught that we can't follow Him *alone*. We need to be with each other, and we need to pray with each other. Anyone who thinks they are living a Christian life privately without being part of a group of praying people is wrong....they might be doing good for others, they *might* be praying on their own, but they are not a Christian disciple in the way that Jesus talks about. That does not mean the traditional view of church is necessary of course, but it does mean that you need to be meeting regularly with others to pray, and it also says in another part of the New Testament also to worship God and to receive teaching (Acts 2:42, Hebrews 10:25).

1 Corinthians 1: 9 says *God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful. We are not only in fellowship with each other, but again we are reminded that we are in fellowship with Jesus. The sort of fellowship we have with Jesus should be a model of the sort of fellowship we have with each other, and vice versa. For in 2 Corinthians Paul says May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all (13:14). The fellowship of the Holy Spirit means that a Christian relationship is much more than just a friendship, God is there too. We relate to each other as we relate to Jesus, and that should also be as He relates to the Father!*

So we start our prayer very much together. We are not always physically together, sometimes we may be part of a group but not able to be physically present (someone ill, or a missionary sent abroad for instance). Yet even then there is a togetherness knowing that others are praying for you and with you. And others who we do not know are praying with us, for the agenda is set the same across the world; and all God's people are seeking hopefully to see His Kingdom come, His will be done, etc in their own local communities and situations. The whole 'company of saints' joins in, as it says in the old hymn:

*As o'er each continent and island
The dawn leads on another day
The voice of prayer is never silent
Nor dies the strain of praise away*
(John Ellerton)

So images begin to come to mind about this praying. We are a great army, as we pray, the army is working together, marching together. The more we pray, the more unified and ready the army is. We are part of a great group that belongs together....a great nation or *kingdom*. God is The King, we are His people. Think of an ancient King riding on his horse with the banner or flag of the nation flying above him, and we are marching behind. We *belong* to this great King.





"Father"

And yet, this great King is our *Father*. He is not some far off ruler that we never see. He is our Father and we have a relationship with Him. Jesus teaches clearly that the sort of Father that God is is the most loving there could be. Think of the Parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15), here we see a Father who:

- Allows his son to go away and make a big mistake, even wasting the father's own money
- Never gives up believing that one day he will come back (v20), even though it had been a long time since he had seen him or heard from him
- Welcomes him back with open arms and a celebration

How does that match up with the idea that God is some grouchy old man just looking for opportunities to 'get us'? *This only happened to me because I deserved it, I did something wrong and now God has got even.* That's not the picture of **Father** that the Bible gives us. The prodigal son story, in many ways, is a summary of the whole Bible. God gave his first son (Adam) the right to squander everything He had made for him, Adam leaves home (Eden) and humans since then have run from God, spending their time in 'wild living'.....occasionally someone says "I need to go back to God....".....read the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob in Genesis. And when we do come back, God is always waiting! David sinned, but then repented (Psalm 51) and God received him back....there are many more examples.

God the Father describes Himself as being 'slow to anger'...

Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity.
(Joel 2:13)

The Bible tells us God is like this **NINE** times infact (Exodus 34:6, Numbers 14:18, Nehemiah 9:17, Psalms 86:15, 103:8, 145:8, Joel 2:13, Jonah 4:2, Nahum 1:3). Have a look at all of them, the saints of old *knew* God to be slow to anger...a God of overriding love. Jonah used that as an excuse for not obeying Him!

As we come to an understanding of what God is like, we grow in confidence to be able to approach Him. He is *our Father* because of what Jesus has done for us....making it possible for us to approach Him. We are *always* welcome to come into His Presence, because the way in has been opened for us by Jesus!

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus,





*by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body,
and since we have a great priest over the house of God,
let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having
our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed
with pure water. (Hebrews 10:19 - 22)*

Some of us do not have human fathers, or do not have good relationships with them if we do. But there is probably at least one older adult with whom you have a good relationship, someone who represents authority in your life as well as love. How do you approach that person (your father, mother, or someone else)? Do you come up to them trembling, or with confidence that you have a *right* to be there with them? Jesus has given us the **right** to come up to God!

Actually the Bible teaches us we can have many different types of relationship with God. He is not only our Father. In Song of Solomon we see Him as our lover, He is also our Friend, our Comforter, our helper. Some of these relationships involve Jesus, the Son. Others involve the Holy Spirit, But Jesus is here telling us to pray to the **Father**. Why? Because He is the source of all things, the ultimate Creator and Provider. The most common name for Him in English not so long ago was **Providence**....the Provider. We come to God the Father and Provider of all we need; and we come also like Jesus came, trusting Him to answer our prayer.

When we come to the Father, however, we have a problem....we can't see Him! In fact, as He said to Moses:

*"But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for no-one may see me and live."
(Exodus 33:20)*

and yet He also says:

*if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and **seek my face**
and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and
will heal their land.
(2 Chronicles 7:14)*

So, what are we to do? If we actually see Him we will die, and yet He tells us to try to see Him!! Is there a way through this, or are we left with a problem we will never solve? There is, of course, an answer! It might help to think of the sun to fully understand it.....

On a bright day, especially in winter when the sun is low in the sky, we get blinded as we walk around. It is dangerous to look directly at the sun at any time, and it certainly hurts your eyes at the very least if you try it. There is no way you can ever 'see' the sun, it's too bright. But if you turn your back to it and face the other way, you see everything else clearly. All the detail is there, colour is vibrant, unlike on a dull day or when you are looking at things with the sun in front of you. We get an idea of the *glory* of the sun by seeing how it *glorifies* the things it shines on. It's the same with the Father. We can't look directly *at* Him but if we stand looking the other way we see His glory through what He shines on.





Ok, ok, so what does *that* mean? What is God shining on? Of course, on everything; but that is much the same way as the sun shines on everything even on a cloudy day. No, the sun *really* came out and shone clearly on Jesus. He is the image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15). When we look at Jesus we see the glory of God reflected. We are looking at a Man, so we have in a sense our backs to the spiritual world and our eyes on the physical. But that Man is illuminated by the power of the Father's radiance.

Peter, James and John climbed a hill with Jesus and for a while they turned to face God with Him, and then they were dazzled (see Matthew 17). The more we look at Jesus, the more of God's glory is reflected back to us, and the more of the Father we see. If we do nothing else with our Bibles but read the 4 gospels over and over, we will gain a deeper and deeper understanding of the Father by seeing His image in Jesus.

As we read we find the Holy Spirit explains the Word to us. Jesus reveals the Father, and the Holy Spirit reveals Jesus: its like He polishes the lens we look through to see Jesus, and to see the reflection of the Father. The more we understand that what Jesus did and taught is what the Father is like, the more we will know the Father, and be able to pray "Our Father" with confidence.

Jesus met with the Father everyday, and tells us to do the same. Our meeting should not just be one of listing wants and needs, for ourselves or others. The prayer we are looking at shows us that....it's a prayer about relationship all the way through. We will see that more as we get further into it. For now, however, let us just spend some time alone with our Father, confident that He wants to be alone with us!

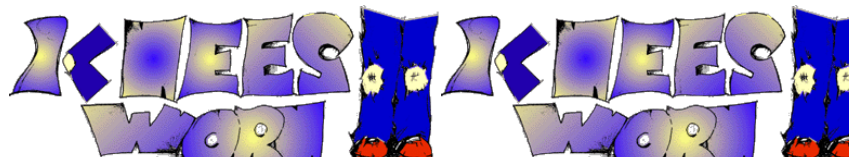
"in Heaven"

The final thing we need to understand before we continue with the prayer is where the Father is. He is not here on earth. He is not '*living in my heart*' (the Father isn't, but the Holy Spirit is if you are a Christian). The Father is in heaven. Where is that? Someone once said '*heaven is where God is*' which means then that '*God is where God is*'. If that sounds twisted, it's not too different from the answer He gave Moses when he asked Him His name:

God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'" (Exodus 3:14)

I'm not sure how you imagine heaven, but the Bible says the following things about it:

- it's where God sits on the throne
(Psalm 123:1, Matthew 23:22,



Hebrews 9:24, Revelation chapter 4)

- God is in total control (Psalm 103:19, Psalm 115:3)
- it's the centre of all good things (James 3:17, 2 Peter 3:13)
- no more death or decay there! (1 Peter 1:4, Luke 12:33)

If you read the last few chapters of the book of Revelation, you'll see some wonderful descriptions of what John saw of heaven in his vision. But why is it important for us to remember that the Father is in heaven as we come to pray?

Because its important to remember that God is not where we are, and He doesn't see what we see either...He sees far more. Imagine being on top of a tall building, looking down at the road below. You can see that one road is completely blocked by an accident, and now coming along a joining road you see someone you know and they are indicating to turn into the road that is blocked. **You** know that would not be best because you can see all the roads, but they can't. You could try to send them a message, to guide them into a different option. They might not do what you say, because the way you suggest is a longer way round. But that is because they can't see what you can see.

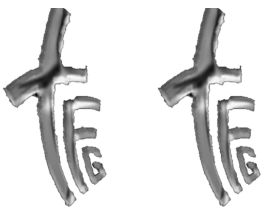
God is able to see far more than just the roads around us, He has a view of where our lives are going, what we need to live them well, and also how the current hardship or difficulty is good training for us too. When we pray to Him He hears what we say, and we can trust that He has a better view of the situation than we do.

It's more than that though. He is in heaven not just with a better view, but with more resources than we could ever imagine possible on earth. When Jesus walked the earth He was only ever in one place at a time... one day Jerusalem, the next Jericho. Not both. He never even made it as far as Greece! God is in heaven and able to be involved where I am now at the same time as where you are and where 6000000000 others are too! And He can use all the power of heaven to sort the problems out.

I like to imagine Captain Kirk (or Picard or Janeway if you prefer) in *Star Trek* on the bridge during a crisis. At the flick of a button the screen can show any situation anywhere on the planet below (and from any angle!!). He can see better than the crew members down below just what is going on, and assess the situation immediately. I know God is so much more powerful than that, but it helps me to gain some idea of what it means for Him to be 'in heaven' as I pray. We do not pray 'our Father, here in the same mess as I am, what are we going to do?' we pray 'our Father *in heaven* above this problem , help me through it'.

So what right do we have to approach Him if that is where He is? The only right is the one Jesus has bought for us:

Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.



(Hebrews 4:16)

Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold. We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to keep the Israelites from gazing at it while the radiance was fading away. But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

(2 Corinthians 3:12 -18)

We can approach God the father with boldness because Jesus dealt with sin, dealt with our sin, and made us righteous in God's sight. You may not feel righteous, you may be very conscious of your sin, but if you have received Him you have been made righteous...and you can therefore say: *bold I approach the throne of God, and claim the crown through Christ my own* (Wesley).

"Our Father in Heaven"

Now let's put all of that together. He is our Father, He is in heaven. Wow! We have a Father in heaven! Heaven is the power centre of the universe (because He is there, as He is the source of the power), and the promise is that we belong there too! That makes sense if He is our Father, because surely we belong where the Father is? The Bible says as much too.

Now if we are children, then we are heirs--heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

(Romans 8:17)

And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

(Ephesians 2:6,7)

The purpose of Jesus coming and dying for us was not *just* to save us from our sins, but to raise us up to heaven...not just so we avoid hell but so that we **reign** with Him from there. Mind blowing stuff. The father is in heaven and that's where He wants His children, all those to whom He has given the right to be called children of God (John 1:12). Jesus said

Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne.

(Revelation 3:20,21)

Jesus is 'sitting on the Father's throne' and He wants us on there as well! He said



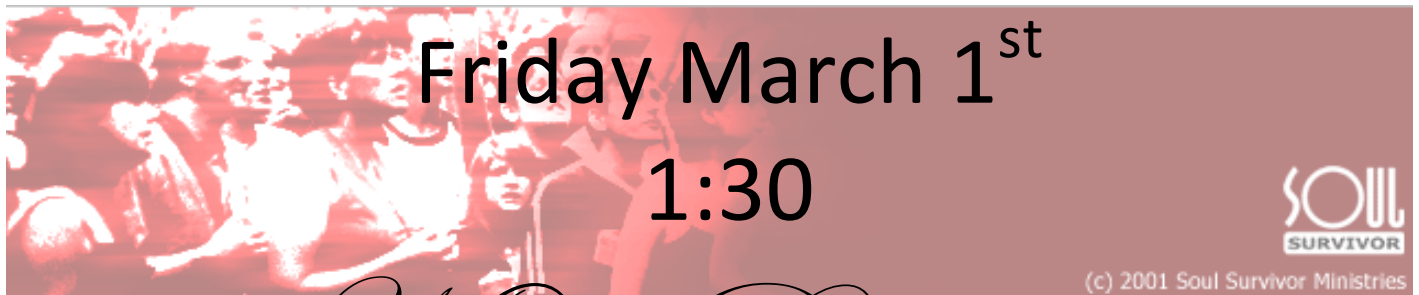
do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.

(Luke 10:20)

In that place we are protected and far above the reach of the Devil or any adversary.

Jesus taught us to pray this prayer because He wanted us to have a full understanding of our relationship with God, and this prayer is really all about that all the way through. We had to start by having our mind filled with the Father and all that he is in heaven. Now we have that clear, we can go on to pray with confidence because we are sure about Who it is we are praying too.

So, as we start to pray let's remember that it's not always going to be like it is today if things are bad. God is in heaven, and one day we will be with Him. In the meantime, as the song goes "You are God in heaven, and here am I on earth, so I'll let my words be few..."



Mike Pilavachi

@ TFG!

Founder and Leader of *Soul Survivor*

Join us if you can!

