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Theology, Christian spirituality and the Lord's prayer according to the Gospel of Matthew

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Prayer facilitates and constitutes dialogue between God and Christians. It also enables believers to experience God in prayer. A prerequisite is the recognition that God is the bona fide source of daily provision and the supreme One who brings about spiritual transformation and maturity. The objective of this research was to explore how the Lord's Prayer offers the principal spiritual directives that guide Christians towards spiritual growth and enable them to experience divine involvement. Therefore, methodologically, the Lord's Prayer has been examined from a theological-metaphorical perspective to discern the divine lived experiences embedded in the text. Consequently, the approach involved, firstly, a discussion of the character or nature of prayer among Christians; secondly, the contextualisation of the Lord's Prayer within Matthew; thirdly, the localisation of the Prayer within the Sermon on the Mount and the Gospel; and finally, an investigation of the spirituality conveyed through the Prayer from a theological-metaphorical perspective. The significance of this study lies in alerting Christian believers to God's presence and involvement in their daily lives and experience this divine presence and involvement more deeply. Insight into the various petitions of the Lord's Prayer equips believers to experience God within the different dimensions Jesus addresses in the petitions in the Prayer. Thus, every prayer has the potential to foster a personal divine lived experience with God – whether in the 'glorification of God's name', in effecting the 'coming of the kingdom', and in living according to 'the will of God'.

Contribution: Prayer creates a sacred space where God's voice addresses the pray-er and provides corresponding circumstances. This study provides a foundation for Systematic Theology, New Testament studies, Practical Theology, and Christian ethics in post-modern contexts. The theology embedded in prayer is here interpreted metaphorically as a means of understanding divine spirituality.

Keywords: theology; spirituality; prayer; family metaphor; heaven; kingdom.

Introduction

Prayer[1] enables Christians to engage with God and helps them to glorify Him, to seek the coming of his will on earth, and to submit to his will on earth. What is needed is a deeper awareness of God as the true source of all things, and the only One who can bring transformation, forgiveness, love, healing, and spiritual maturity.[2] The Lord's Prayer is one of the spiritual disciplines that guides Christians in their spiritual formation. Although Christian prayer is often centred on seeking God's blessings, its deeper purposes are relationship, glorification, and transformation. As articulated in Matthew 6:9–13, the Lord's Prayer 'honours God and allows God to use the person to accomplish His purposes' (Kolawole 2021:1).

Conceivably, no part of Scripture is as well-known as the Lord's Prayer in the Gospel of Matthew. Its words and style are recognised throughout Christianity. Many without Bibles, or who are unbelievers, are familiar with 'Our Father' or the 'Lord's Prayer'. Possibly no biblical text is at once so theological, uncomplicated and yet so profound as the Lord's Prayer. For many, it was the first prayer learned as little children. Primordially, this prayer encompasses the nucleus of almost everything that even the most mature Christian could desire.

According to Matthew 6:7, the Gentiles [ἐθνικοί] believed their gods could be persuaded through the babbling of many words (cf. also Hendriksen et al. 2001:324; Morris 1992:141). Jesus's teaching

1.Francois, thank you for the example you set as a believer, researcher, and leader in New Testament studies. It is an honour to be associated with you.

2.The responsibilities of those who pray can neither be neglected nor ignored.

Note: The manuscript is a contribution to the collection titled 'Francois P. Viljoen Festschrift,' under the expert guidance of guest editor Prof. Albert Johannes Coetsee.

presents an entirely different approach to prayer.[3] The trilogy of God's 'grace, love and forgiveness' cannot be realised through the senseless flow of words; rather, a devoted heart communicates its deepest affections. Therefore, when we pray, we ought to bear in mind Jesus's words: 'your Father knows what you need before you ask Him' (6:8). Consequently, God's children do not pray to inform him of their needs. Instead, they pray to rouse themselves in seeking God to exercise their faith by contemplating his promises, and to unburden their anxieties by decanting themselves in his presence. In so doing, they declare that, in God alone, they place their hope, trust, and expectations that all good things, that is, his kingdom will come and that 'God's will', will be done. Ultimately, God's devoted children earnestly pursue divine intimacy through prayer (Gerber 2022:1).

All God's children can then indisputably confess that prayer is profoundly significant in their lives, in accordance with Jesus's teaching about specific directives to his disciples on prayer. For Jesus, prayer is a means of communication that connects humanity with God. It constitutes dialogue rather than merely a platform for petitions. In every prayer, two aspects are important: the *theological* perception of the pray-er, and the *linguistics* employed. Both are foundational for experiencing God in the moment of prayer and for preparing the pray-er for what must and ultimately will take place.

The purpose of this research is to explore how the Lord's Prayer provides the principal spiritual directives to guide Christians towards spiritual development and to experience divine involvement in their lives. Therefore, methodologically, the Lord's Prayer will be studied from a theological-metaphorical perspective in order to discern the divine lived experiences embedded in the text. The approach will, firstly, involve a discussion of the character or nature of prayer among Christians; secondly, the contextualisation of the Lord's Prayer in Matthew; thirdly, the localisation of the Prayer within the Sermon on the Mount and the Gospel; and finally, an investigation of the spirituality embodied in the Prayer from a theological-metaphorical perspective.

The role of prayer among Christians

Among Christians, prayer is widely perceived as vitally important to constitute sacred space within the realm of Christianity. Yet, for many, it has become merely a routine or custom – an act driven primarily by habit to accompany their journey of faith (Andrian et al. 2021) to complement their journey of faith. Despite numerous different opinions and understandings of prayer, the fundamental and indisputable goal remains to stay focused on God. As already noted, prayer constitutes the foremost means of communication employed by believers to engage in dialogue with God (Ngoei & Losong 2020; Purnomo et al. 2024:2).[4]

A believer's perception of prayer should not be reduced to random petitions. Prayer ought to be regarded, firstly, as the epitome of how we perceive God, express our faith in him, articulate our experience of him, involve him in our lives, and glorify him in our daily life.[5] Secondly, prayer should be recognised as an activity through which we strengthen our relationship and interaction with God. McIntosh (2005) affirms this, explaining:

> We pray first because we believe something; perhaps at that stage a very crude or vague something. And with the deepening of prayer, its patient cultivation, there comes […] the enrichment and enlargement of belief, as we enter first-hand communion with the Reality who is the object of our faith. (p. 395)

A believer's perception of God's character largely determines, firstly, the perception and awareness of God's involvement; secondly, the nature and frequency of divine lived experiences in prayer; thirdly, the consequences of God's involvement; and fourthly, the depth of the believer's devotion to God. In fact, devoted Christians, through a faithful prayer life, will 'endeavor to actively relate to God in their theology' (Van Oudtshoorn 2012:286). The content of prayer itself reflects how God is perceived. Van Oudtshoorn (2012:287) aptly describes prayer as 'theology in action'. Ultimately, the theology of the pray-er, determines how that person interacts with God. Therefore, each prayer reveals the perception of the pray-er about God's being, God's character, and God's relationship and involvement with his creation.

The Lord's Prayer in the Gospel of Matthew

The Prayer (Mt 6:9–13)[6] is linked to its context by an invocation Οὕτως οὖν προσεύχεσθε (6:9a). With this, Jesus teaches his followers to adopt what he presented as a model for their prayers. This invocation (Mt 6:9b) is followed by two triads of petitions: three 'you'-petitions concerning divine matters (6:9c; 10a; 10b), and three 'we'-petitions concerning human matters (6:11–13). The first, second, and fourth petitions each consist of a single component, while the third, fifth, and sixth petitions contain two components each. Then, the first three lines of the first triad of petitions is bound together by a recurring parallel structure, whereas

3.Jesus identified two kinds of potential hypocrisy: 'to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others' (Mt 6:5), or piling up empty phrases 'as the Gentiles do' (6:7), Jesus's concern was neither with prayer nor with long prayers or repeated prayers. Jesus, himself, at times prayed through the night (Lk 6:12), In Gethsemane, he repeated his prayer thrice, 'saying the same words again' (Mt 26:44), Jesus's concern was that we should not use the same words repeatedly (βαττολογήσητε), His words in Matthew 6:7b–8 at least refers to a 'long-winded and probably flowery or rhetorical oration'.

4.The author of the Gospel of Matthew wants the Lord's Prayer to be a domicile of resonance for the presence of the Father. This realisation (cf. Ps 119:34, 95, 104) touches the depths of the heart that opens to the Father (cf. Ps. 119:75; also vv. 79 & 152). Here the prayer directs the course of life from within: pious persons will endeavour to follow the divine's instruction (Ps 119:105), 'Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path' (Waaijman 2023:715).

5.Spirituality usually involves cognitive frameworks and perspectives to enable believers to make sense of 'a broad range of experiences, and to find meaning and significance in them' (Watts 2011:172). As Christian believers we must bear in mind that 'the experience of faith' is always central to the discipline of spirituality and divine experiences.

6.The central segment (Mt 6:7–15) of the section (6:2–18) breaks the pattern established by the parallel units in 6:2–4, 5–6, and 16–18 with extended instruction on the practice of prayer (Wilson 2022:145). At the heart of the section is Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer (6:9–13), which is strengthened by a pair of interpretive *logia* (6:7–8, 14–15). The units, Matthew 6:2–4, 5–6, 16–18 are mirrored in 6:7–8 insofar as it begins with a negative example (6:7) and ends positively with an affirmation regarding 'your Father' (6:8).

the second triad is connected via the conjunction particle καί (and) at the beginning of Matthew 6:12 and 6:13. The final petition is distinctive from the rest in that it is expressed as a negative appeal consisting of dual layers.

In Matthew 6:9, Jesus invites his hearers (implied in Οὕτως οὖν) to enter into a form of prayer that facilitates transformation through divine involvement in human brokenness. Therefore, Jesus redefines both the nature of prayer (Mt 6:9–13) and the invitation to pray (6:7–8). His teaching in this passage on prayer comprises the following: firstly, it coincides with transformation; secondly, its content acknowledges the believer's inability to achieve transformation; thirdly, a prayer such as the Lord's Prayer affirms the greatness and majesty of God in the accomplishment and success to become a disciple of Christ through the Spirit; and finally, every prayer should ultimately focus on the glorification of the heavenly Father [ἁγιασθήτω τὸ ὄνομά σου]. Evidently, the Lord's Prayer strengthens both communication and relationship between Christian believers and God (cf. Wibowo, Tanhidy & Ming 2024:2–3).

The Gospel of Matthew abounds in prayers.[7] In these prayers, God is not presented as a neutral God who is approached merely to satisfy human needs. Rather, God is pictured as a Person (Father) who knows each pray-er and enables dialogue. The pray-er may ask God for appropriate succour, in accordance with the Lord's Prayer. This picturing serves to be a powerful incentive to pray, and to nurture and experience God's presence and relationship through prayer. Therefore, prayer should be perceived and regarded as vital and important. Significant features occur in the Prayer. Firstly, 'predicates are based on an intimate relationship with God: namely, "Father"'. This relationship is founded on a 'respectful dependence', 'affectionate intimacy' and 'obedience' (Keener 2009:329). Secondly, the Prayer prioritises the glory of God before the personal needs of the petitioner. The 'Your-petitions' for God's glory, kingdom, and will, precede the 'us-petitions' for the needs of the community (Keener 2009:231).

The Lord's Prayer also unites three temporal dimensions. It relates to the present in the 'petitioning for bread' (Mt 6:11), to the past in the 'petitioning for forgiveness' (6:12), and to the future in the 'petitioning not to be tempted' (6:13). Establishing a point of contact between the 'when', 'here', and the 'then' seems to be crucial for conceptualising these petitions. This proves that the Prayer balances past, present, and future aspects (Nygaard 2012:36). This balance suggests that the fourth petition ('give us today our daily bread' – Mt 6:11) is perhaps the most challenging to interpret. If the reference, 'today', qualifies remaining aorists (Mt 6:5, 6), there is no reason why the fifth and sixth petitions cannot also be understood as present realities. Thus, the fourth petition for daily bread 'now' (present) implies support for, and the understanding of the present realisation of the fifth and sixth petitions. In fact, such a recommendation is likely. Nygaard (2012:35) reinforces this argument by showing that the Prayer encloses the ethics of the kingdom, which is already present (Mt 12:28; 13:16–17).

From a Matthean perspective, the Prayer remains relevant for the disciples' practice today. Theologically, the kingdom is present in Jesus's teaching, and therefore he calls his disciples to pray this Prayer. 'The relational language Matthew uses implies a continued religious experience' (cf. Nygaard 2012:36).

When Jesus then uses the adverb Οὕτως (translated as 'Thus', or 'In this manner', or 'This is how'), he did not say, 'Use exactly these words, and no other'. Rather, the 'Lord's Prayer' serves as a model prayer for Matthew – an outline for devotion. This outline holds two principal foci: firstly, the glorification of God[8]; and secondly, attention *then* to focus on human needs (cf. Hendriksen & Kistemaker 2001:324).

The locality of the Lord's Prayer in the Sermon on the Mount and the Gospel

In relation to the language used elsewhere in Matthew, and within the idiom of the 1st century, readers are taught to converse with God intimately. The various prayers in Matthew (see footnote 7) prove that the use of particular vocabulary shapes different forms of prayer and distinct experiences. It is important to bear in mind that the juxtaposition of images and the configurations of themes and priorities, as seen in Matthew 6:9–13 also occurs in a variety of other Matthean texts. These contexts suggest that Jesus, in constructing the Prayer, 'drew upon expressions of spirituality familiar to his followers' (Wilson 2022:147).

After a thorough analysis of the Sermon on the Mount, Ridlehoover (2020:63) argues, based on both internal textual analysis and external scholarly evaluation, that sufficient evidence exists to regard the Lord's Prayer as the significant centre of the Sermon's structure. The Prayer also serves as 'the foundation for subsequent parallels, both lexical and thematic, within the Sermon on the Mount'.

This suggests that the structure of the Prayer corresponds closely with that of the Sermon on the Mount. Both structures use 'internal structuring, thematic consistency, and verbal patterning' (Ridlehoover 2020:63). Such strategies confirm Matthew's intention to guide the reading of the Sermon on the Mount. In his research, Ridlehoover demonstrates that the Sermon's structure consists of a series of inclusions working towards a palpable centre of the Lord's Prayer. Likewise, the Prayer itself works towards a central pivot. In

7.The temptation of Jesus (Mt 4:10); Sermon on the Mount (5:1–7:29); prayer in the disciple discourse (9:38); cry of jubilation (11:25–27); feeding miracles (14:19; 15:36); prayer on a mountain (14:23–33); correction and prayer (18:19–20); prayer for the children (19:13–15); temple cleansing and fig tree (21:12–22); the eschatological discourse (24:20).

8.When the Holy Spirit works in the hearts of Christians at prayer, these works are always directed to glorify Christ (Jn 16:14) and to acknowledge Jesus as Lord (1 Cor 12:3). All this amounts to 'a participation in a divine dialogue' in which prayer is 'incarnational'. In summary, it involves the 'agency of the *Holy Spirit*', the 'mediation of *God the Son*' and 'an address to and glorification of *God the Father*' (cf. Thiselton 2007:454-455).

both sections of teaching, the fundamental theme occurs to be righteousness, prioritising heavenly matters over earthly ones. These matters are conveyed within a deliberate and well-adjusted literary structure (Ridlehoover 2020:63).

Matthew's recognition of parallels between the Prayer and the Sermon drawn from his inherited traditions, encouraged him to ascertain connections between these two texts. He then amended segments of both the Sermon and the Prayer to increase their lexical, structural, and thematic parallels. It seems as if Matthew's aim has been to encourage prayer, to emphasise its foundational role, to lead the pray-er into lived experiences of the Father, and to reinforce their experience of righteousness.

The importance of prayer within the Sermon on the Mount is evident both from the '*centrality* of the Lord's Prayer' and the 'instructions to ask, seek, and knock' at the end of the Sermon (Mt 7:7–11). The Sermon on the Mount ends compellingly with a powerful reiteration of prayer (Mt 7:7–11) and a summary of 'greater righteousness' as the Golden Rule (7:12; Ridlehoover 2020:203).

Prayer, metaphor and spirituality

The previous discussion serves to contextualise what follows, in which the Lord's Prayer will be theologically analysed to designate the phenomenal function of metaphor within the lived experiences (spiritualities) embedded in prayer.

Defining metaphor

Firstly, in the first half of the 20th century, Stanford (1936) observed:

> Metaphor is the vital principle in all living languages. It is the verbal expression of the process and products of the imagination with its powers of creative synthesis […] Metaphor is thus the dynamic, synthetic and creative force in language. (p. 100)

Ricoeur (1978:80), quoting Shelley, notes that language is 'vitally metaphorical', while adding that 'metaphor is the constitutive form of language'. Similarly, Lakoff and Johnson (1980:3) emphasise that, 'Metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language, but in thought and action.' They (Lakoff & Johnson 1980:5) also state that '[*t*]he essence of *metaphor* is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of *another*'. Rosenblatt (1994:1) defines metaphor as 'a figure of speech in which words that literally denote one kind of object or idea are used in the place of another, suggesting a resemblance of analogue'. By the end of the 20th century, Avis (1999:82) concluded that 'Metaphor is widely recognised as the operative factor in language.'

Secondly, Swinburn (1992:48) emphasised that the meaning of metaphors depends almost entirely on their immediate context: they are justified solely by their use. According to him, language shapes 'our perception in the moment of speech or thought as present, distinguished from other times as either past or future'.

Thirdly, a metaphor is constructed from two components. One element describes something in terms of another. This happens when two components or two perceptions are joined, bringing together the primary perception in combination with a secondary perception. Black (1962:44; cf. Avis 1999:83) argues that metaphor 'selects, emphasizes, suppresses and organizes features of the principal subject by implying statements about it that normally apply to the subsidiary subject'.

Fourthly, metaphors enable us to draw on concrete knowledge to reason about theoretical concepts (Gibbs 2006; cf. Jamrozik et al. 2016:1080).

In the following subsections, it will be pointed out and formulated how the Lord's Prayer – an extended metaphor describing the essence of the Christian life – contains within it other metaphors that complement and explain this essence, enabling believers to experience God in their daily lives. As Sweetser and DesCamp (2014:23) observe, 'Metaphors for the Divine-Human relationship are […] cognitively much like other metaphors used by humans. They are motivated by embodied experience'.

Metaphor, imagination and spirituality

Faith and the function of imagination are essential for perceiving the nature of Christianity. The significance of the Bible resides in its central images and metaphors, which form the focus of Jesus's teaching, for example the parables of the kingdom of God. Images, symbols, and metaphors provide 'vitality and dynamism' to the biblical message They surely determine the Bible's form, influence and content. For biblical insight and faith, metaphoric perceptions disclose and explain profound truths. Many biblical symbols and metaphors were transmitted through the believing community – Israel and the early church (Avis 1999:4).

Imagination[9] is intrinsic to prayer, liturgy and theology. It speaks their language and conveys their truths through metaphors and symbols. From what has been said so far, the centrality of imagination is unmistakable. Language expresses itself through metaphor and symbol, which emerge from imagination. These figurative modes are vital in the Gospels because they frame substantive religious discourse. Their purpose is to transcend. Avis (1999) confirms this by stating:

> [*T*]he truth of Christian belief is not something purely immanent in and reducible to mundane, human, and social factors, as the reductionists claimed; it infinitely transcends them – it remains ineffable. And because it transcends this-worldly factors, this truth and reality can only be grasped meaningfully in the realm of imagination. (p. 8)

9.To imagine in the present a future which furnishes an objective or something to accomplish, establishes a vision of how things may be to which we look forward now. Quite interesting is 'the way in which certain aspects of this capacity exercise a necessary and transformative reflexive impact upon our ways of being in the present' (Hart 2013:243). Steiner (1992:144) notes that the human ability to think about temporality, to construe past and future as distinct from the present, is largely bound up with our use of language. Language 'happens in time but also, very largely, creates the time in which it happens' (1992:138).

This occurs within a specific idiom of time, adopting earthly images to evoke a realm beyond. Avis (1999:8) rightly concludes that '[*c*]reative imagination, rather than some supposedly objective, rationally specifiable procedure' outside the domain of personal knowledge, is the key to perceiving reality.

In conclusion we can assert that metaphors function as vehicles of new insight and are constitutive of our grasp of truth: 'symbols mediate the transcendent because they participate in what they symbolise' (Avis 1999:10). Linguistic images enrich our understanding and deepen our experience of this Prayer in images that extend our understanding. We apprehend reality more profoundly 'through the truth of imagination than we do when we pursue the illusion of precise, specifiable, purely objective, literal description' (Avis 1999:10). This research therefore proposes that analysing the Lord's Prayer through the lens of metaphor enables us to gain reliable knowledge and lived experiences of our relationship with God the Father.

The rhetorical power of such metaphors lies in their credibility, their capacity for association, and the outcomes they convey. The careful construction of this extended metaphor (Lord's Prayer) shapes the trustworthiness of Jesus's teaching as well as the disciples' perception of its truth (Oswald & Rihs 2013:134). In so doing, it constitutes understanding, believing, and experiencing (cf. Oswald & Rihs 2013:135).

The Lord's Prayer: A metaphor for constituting spirituality

Familia Dei as metaphor

In this Prayer, several metaphors occur which relate to the household of God (Kingdom of God – Mt 6:10). These include Father (family head – Mt 6:9), children[10] (family members implied from 'our Father' – 6:9; cf. 5:9), heavens (family characteristics and environment – 6:9–10), kingdom (family supervision – 6:10), God's will (family discipline – 6:10), daily bread (family needs – 6:11), forgiveness (family ethics – 6:12), and the evil one (family protection – 6:13).

Adams (1983:56–71) argues that the family (household) metaphor should be regarded as an archetypal metaphor.[11] Osborn (2009:116) opines that 'archetypal metaphors are grounded in prominent features of experience, in objects, actions, or conditions which are inescapable salient in human consciousness'. This explains why Jesus employed the family metaphor which enables him not only to talk about the Father but also to explain 'the character of the relationship between God and God's children'. By using this imagery, Jesus draws the reader or the pray-er into the text, enabling them to experience life within the *familia Dei* with the Father, while recognising characters, objects, and events described in the Prayer (Mt 6). 'He incorporates conventions from the everyday family life[12] of the 1st-century Mediterranean environment that used to be widely accepted in his description of the *familia Dei*' (Van der Merwe 2015:6). Jesus describes this kind of fellowship to be constituted in the *familia Dei*. He applies the most relevant and applicable features of earthly family life to portray the relationship between true believers both communally and corporately with God (cf. Tollefson 1999:85).

Our Father [Πάτερ ἡμῶν, 6:9][13]: Head of the family

By using this intimate form of address, 'Πάτερ ἡμῶν',[14] Jesus endeavours his followers to encounter prayer as a lived and personal experience with God.[15] The possessive pronoun 'Our' [ἡμῶν] (Mt 6:9) immediately creates a bridge between the 'you' and 'me'. As Timms (2008:16) notes, 'it speaks of a shared experience and a shared ownership', and thus of communion. Early believers could not conceive 'personal Christian faith'. Christian identity was always understood in relation to others. The corporate model prevailed.[16] Therefore, with this dynamic and powerful phrase, Jesus wants to, in the first place, captures our attention; secondly, calls us to identify with the Father; thirdly, summons us to obey and honour the Father's will; and fourthly, aligns us with the content of the Prayer. This reciprocal dynamic contributes to the broader framework which is further elaborated on in the rest of Matthew's Gospel (cf. Van der Merwe 2015:5).

The title Πάτερ also functions as an indirect reference to God's very self (cf. Jn 17:6). In fact, God has made himself known, especially through the revelation of the divine name[17] (Ex 3:13–14; Wilson 2022:147). To declare 'that *God is a Father*, […] highlights our dependence on God' (Sweetser & DesCamp 2014:16).

The image of God as Father was already familiar to the Jews from the Hebrew Scriptures, where God is portrayed as the

10.Already in Matthew 5, Jesus's followers are referred to as *children of the Father*, 'ὅπως γένησθε *υἱοὶ τοῦ πατρὸς ὑμῶν* τοῦ ἐν οὐρανοῖς' (5:45; cf. οἱ υἱοὶ τῆς βασιλείας, 13:38).

11.'Because of a certain universality of appeal provided by their attachment to basic, commonly shared motives, the speaker can expect such metaphors to touch the greater part of his audience'.

12.Family life includes Father, children, respect, ethics, discipline, forgiveness, daily needs, life in the household, and protection.

13.Jeremias (1978:54–57) notes that the gospel tradition agrees that, in prayer, Jesus addressed God as 'Father' (Πάτερ). Alternatively, 'Abba', also occurs as preserved in Mark 14:36. All four Gospels are unanimous that Jesus used this address in all his prayers (Mk 14:36; Mt 6:9/Lk 11:2; Mt 2:25ff./Lk 10:21; 23:34, 46; Mt 26:42; Jn 11:41; 12:27ff.). Although some of the material is suspect as to whether it preserves the actual words of Jesus, the fact remains that it appears in all four the Gospel traditions and that no contrary testimony occurs.

14.See also '*πατὴρ ὑμῶν* ὁ οὐράνιος τέλειός ἐστιν' (Mt 5:48); 'τῷ *πατρὶ ὑμῶν* τῷ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς' (6:1); 'ὁ *πατήρ σου*' (6:4); 'τῷ *πατρί σου* … καὶ ὁ *πατήρ σου*' (6:6); 'οἶδεν γὰρ ὁ *πατὴρ ὑμῶν* ὧν χρείαν ἔχετε πρὸ τοῦ ὑμᾶς αἰτῆσαι αὐτόν' (6:8).

15.Metaphors for God provide the human ability to conceptualise the inexpressibility of God. 'Humans can only very partially experience and understand God, and even that limited experience is said to transcend verbal experience' (Sweetser & DesCamp 2014:7).

16.The apostle Paul widely made ample use of the plural form of 'you' in his epistles, not as a means to address many separate individuals. He used it as a corporate device to emphasise the unity of the body – the togetherness and inclusiveness of everyone in this new kingdom context (Timms 2008:17).

17.'For this use of ὄνομα, see Matthew 21:9; 23:39; 28:19. Compare John 12:28 ('Father, glorify your name'). For God's holy name, see Leviticus 20:3; 22:2, 32; 1 Chronicles 16:10, 35; 29:16; Psalms 30:4; 33:21; 97:12; 103:1; 105:3; 106:47; 145:21; Ezekiel 20:39; 36:20–22; 39:7, 25; 43:7–8; Amos 2:7 (Wilson 2022:305).

Father of humankind.[18] As Father, he creates life, sustains his children by nurturing and educating them, and provides for their needs (Dt 32:6). In turn, God expects respect and honour, which will result in privileges and rewards for being faithful to his will (Keener 2009:331).

Christ the Son of God [Χριστὸς ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ, 14:33][19]

Matthew frequently presents Jesus as the Son of God and a member of the *familia Dei*. In the infancy narrative, Jesus's identity is introduced by the remarkable connotations of him as person and for being part of the *familia Dei* (1:20). Matthew then vested in the names given to Jesus at his birth: Jesus and Emmanuel (1:23). This, consequently, branched to other descriptive names given to Jesus throughout the Gospel. By referring to Jesus as Emmanuel, Matthew introduces the leitmotif of Jesus as 'the presence of God', a theme Matthew stresses throughout the Gospel that Jesus promised his eternal presence with his disciples. In effect Jesus does perform the presence of God among his children (Grindheim 2012:93).

Their perception of Jesus's presence as a divine 'lived' presence aligns meaningfully with the profound message he communicated to his disciples in the Gospel of Matthew:

> […] *all* authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, *baptizing* them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything *that* I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the *age.* (Mt 28:18b–20; cf. Grindheim 2012:98)

The conviction of Matthew that Jesus represents the presence of God has influenced his biography of Jesus in several ways. As the presence of Jesus continues the presence of God, he interacts with people in ways that echoes God's involvement with Israel in the Scriptures. In doing so, he establishes a new community – the *familia Dei* (Grindheim 2012:101).

Children [ἡμῶν, 11:13]: Members of the family

Though not explicit in the Prayer, the image of believers as God's children occurs in Matthew 5:45: 'ὅπως γένησθε υἱοὶ τοῦ πατρὸς ὑμῶν τοῦ ἐν οὐρανοῖς' ['so that you may be children of your Father in heaven']. This reference relates and incorporates believers into the *familia Dei* (cf. kingdom of God), assigning them both familial responsibilities and awareness constituting divine lived experiences.

This status also points to their future identity as children of God – a character that Jesus describes in the rest of the Prayer and the Sermon on the Mount. It serves to encourage, strengthen, and motivate believers to live as children of God, referred to as children of the Father.

Heavenly and kingdom

The Lord's Prayer mentions 'heaven(s)' twice (Mt 6:9ff.) and 'kingdom' once (6:10). We will now examine the meaning and context of these two terms.

Centrality of the kingdom of heavens: Matthew has a distinctive way of speaking about the kingdom of God,[20] referring instead to the phrase 'the kingdom of heavens' [τῇ βασιλείᾳ τῶν οὐρανῶν].[21] This phrase, used 32 times, marks Matthew's uniqueness when compared with the other Gospels, the rest of the New Testament, and all literature preceding Matthew. The kingdom is therefore the 'central message of *the* teaching *of Jesus*'. In fact, Matthew employs βασιλείᾳ around 50 times, combining it with a variety of expressions such as 'kingdom of heaven', 'kingdom of God', 'the Father's kingdom', or solely, 'kingdom' (Pennington 2008:44).[22]

The following two subsections will show that Matthew uses the noun οὐρανῶν [heavens] with a variety of connotations. The specific context determines its primary meaning of this metaphor in the context, although secondary nuances are not excluded.

Father in heaven: Matthew also uses 'heaven' in reference to God as Father, a theme of major significance for him. Thirteen times he employs the phrase Πάτερ (ἡμῶν) ὁ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς [Father in heavens],[23] and six times the similar phrase (ὑμῖν) ὁ πατὴρ ὑμῶν ὁ οὐράνιος[24] [heavenly Father].[25] For Christians this language is familiar, for believers habitually address God as 'our heavenly Father'. Two observations are notable: Firstly, when the noun 'heaven' refers to God as Father, Matthew consistently uses the unusual plural form οὐρανοῖς. Secondly, references to God as Father often stand in contrast to the heavenly [οὐράνιος] Father and the things on earth (e.g. Mt 23:9).

Kingdom of heaven as the residence of God: Of all New Testament writers, none speaks more about heaven than Matthew. Forms of the Greek word for heaven [οὐρανος] appear 82 times[26] in his Gospel, mostly in the plural (οὐρανόῖς). This represents about 30% of all New Testament occurrences (Clark 2017:63). Yet Jesus or Matthew never describes heaven

18.The word which appears in the Gospels and letters of the early Christian communities as the symbol of the intimate relationship which existed between Jesus and God is 'Abba' – the word used by Jesus when he addressed God, one which can be translated as 'dear Father' or 'my Father'. Jeremias (1964:20) suggests that this intimate form of address expressed the heart of the revelation granted to Jesus by God and that it was the foundation of the mission and authority of Jesus (cf also Kelleher 1983:24). Schillebeeckx (1979:257) sees Jesus's use of Abba as an expression of the heart of his spirituality – the desire to discover and do the will of his Father.

19.Compare Matthew 4:3, 6; 5:6; 8:29; 14:33; 16:16; 27:40, 43, 54. Also, *υἱὸς εἶ τοῦ θεοῦ* (Mt 3:17; 4:3, 6; 8:29) – *υἱὸς Δαυίδ* (9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30, 31; 21:9, 15; 22:42) – *ὁ δὲ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου* (8:20; 9:6; 10:23; 11:19; 12:8, 32, 40; 13:37, 41; 16:13, 27, 28; 17: 9, 12, 22; 19:28; 20:18, 26:45, 64; 28:24, 28, 30; 25:31; 26:2, 24, 25, 44) – τὸν υἱὸν (11:27[2x]; 28:19) – υἱοὶ τοῦ πατρὸς ὑμῶν' (5:45) – ὁ Χριστὸς ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ζῶντος (16:16) – Οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ υἱός μου ὁ ἀγαπητός (17:5).

20.See Matthew 6:9, 10, 14.

21.Matthew is the only New Testament author to use the phrase 'Kingdom of Heaven'.

22.This synonymous parallelism is evident in Matthew 19:23–24: 'And Jesus said to His disciples, "Truly I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. 24 Again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God"'. Here Matthew mentions both the Kingdom of Heaven and the Kingdom of God, connecting them with 'again I say to you'. This repetition signals the same idea.

23.Matthew 5:16, 45; 6:1, 9; 7:11; 10:32, 33; 11:25; 12:50; 8:10, 14, 19; 23:9.

24.Adjective: οὐράνιος; noun plural: οὐρανοῖς (Mt 5:48; 6:14, 26, 32; 15:13; 18:35).

25.Matthew 6:26, 32; 15:13; 18:35.

26.In the singular οὐρανός only in Matthew 5:18; 16:2, 3; 24:35.

as a place apart from earth. From our perspective today, heaven might appear as immaterial existence[27], but Matthew's primary emphasis is that heaven is the dwelling place of God the Father. Forty-six times Matthew refers to God as the 'heavenly Father' (6:26), or as the Father who is 'in heavens' (cf. 6:9, 10, 14).

Through the title 'Father in heaven',[28] Matthew communicates that God always acts rightly. Thus, for Matthew, 'heavenly' is a synonym for good, righteous, and just (Clark 2017:64). It denotes the Father's involvement in the lives of his children (e.g. Mt 6:11–13, 26; 7:11).[29]

Matthew's preference for the phrase τῶν οὐρανῶν ['of heaven', 'from heaven', or even 'heavenly'], is not intended to avoid using the divine name. Rather, it reflects a significant theological fact and teaching. The inbreaking of God's kingdom has come into history through Jesus (Pennington 2008:47). Matthew's most common reference to heaven is uniquely phrased as 'τῇ βασιλείᾳ τῶν οὐρανῶν'. In all 32 occurrences[30] the phrase appears in the plural (τῶν οὐρανῶν). Additionally, Matthew uses the phrase 'kingdom of heavens' multiple times, often to set the heavenly in contrast with the earthly[31] to emphasise the radical difference between these realms. Through a fourfold technique,[32] Matthew highlights the profound incoherence between heaven and earth, between the way God acts and the way humans act. The theological function of the contrasting theme, heaven and earth, is to strengthen the *fundamental* character of Jesus's teaching and ethics. His teachings and parables embody a message that is challenging, urgent, and transformative. Nowhere is this so acute than in the Sermon on the Mount. Here, Matthew calls on the followers of Jesus to live accordingly (Pennington 2008:49).

A different identity: Through the theme of contrast between heaven and earth, Matthew seeks to provide a new identity for the followers of Jesus. They must recognise that they are God's children (Mt 6:6, 8, 9 – God is 'your Father'). They are the true people of God. The Beatitudes illustrate this identity, showing how they are radically different from what they once were.[33] Therefore, Matthew powerfully and appropriately portrays this new way of living as the kingdom τῶν οὐρανῶν. It is fundamentally unlike the kingdoms of this world and human systems. For Matthew, the kingdom of God – described as the kingdom of heaven – is built according to the will of God (Pennington 2008:48).

27.Heaven in Scripture is symbolic. It is not a separate place in the universe or cosmos. It refers to divine dimensions of *existence, of space, time and qualities*, related but much different than this physical realm. Heaven is above knowledge and spiritual illumination (Simpson 2015:20).

28.Matthew 5:16, 48; 7:11, 21; 15:13; 18:14.

29.'"Heaven" points to God's transcendence, while "Father" picks up the committed relationship in which God and those praying stand' according to Nolland (2005:311). Turner (2008:186) points out that the reference 'our Father in heaven' indicates that God 'remains distant from his children because of his glory'.

30.Matthew 3:2, 17; 4:17; 5:3, 10, 19(2x), 20, 7:21; 8:11; 10:7; 11:11, 12; 13:11, 24, 31, 33, 44, 45, 47, 52; 16:19; 18:1, 3, 4, 23; 19:12, 14, 23; 20:1; 22:2; 23:3; 24:29, 31, 36; 25:1.

31.Contrast not in terms of place or space, but in terms of value.

32.Singular versus plural forms of οὐρανοῖς; heaven and earth pairs, usually in contrast; the Father in heaven; and the kingdom of heaven.

33.See, for example, Matthew 5:11, 19, 20, et cetera.

The present realisation of the kingdom of heaven: If the expressions 'in heavens' or 'heavenly' are merely descriptive of the Father's dwelling place, they nevertheless highlight and affirm the Father's character (Clark 2017:65). What we see in all these instances is that the 'kingdom of heaven' is not limited to the idea of future reward or happiness. Instead, it offers the right way of living here and now. Believers are therefore called and challenged to act accordingly (Clark 2017:66). Believers are urged to seek God's presence and lived experience, partnering with him in present circumstances. Unfortunately, many believers have been so absorbed in 'imagining and desiring the bliss of heaven that they have neglected the present' (Wijnands 2014:14ff.). Matthew emphasises that imagining and desiring the bliss of heaven can be experienced in everyday life. The 'Beatitudes', and now the 'Lord's Prayer', serve as essential 'ingredients of spirituality'.

Your will be done [γενηθήτω τὸ θέλημά σου, 6:10]: Family control

This petition relates to Christian practices and life within the *familia Dei*, reflecting the example set by Jesus. At the heart of Jesus's intimate relationship with God lies the unique way in which God's self-communication was embodied in Jesus. Matthew portrays Jesus as driven by a prodigious desire to embody the Word of God, as the one in whom the Word became flesh (Jn 1:14). Jesus is depicted as being led and empowered by the Spirit (at his baptism) (Mt. 3:13–17), enabling him to embody God's presence. His followers eventually recognised in him the embodiment of the new covenant promised to God's people through the prophet Jeremiah (Kelleher 1983:23). Therefore, Matthew records Jesus communicating to his followers that his brothers and sisters are those who do 'the will of my Father in heaven' (Mt 12:50). This clearly reflects his deliberate effort to direct attention towards heaven (Clark 2017:63).

For Matthew, heaven was so central that he took pains to ensure his readers grasped its meaning. To achieve this, he frequently presented contrasting ideas, or oppositions. Similar approaches occur in modern communication. The Gospel of Matthew abounds with this technique. Jesus's teachings are characterised by stark contrasts. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus repeatedly says: 'You have heard that it was said […] but I say […]':

- 'You have heard that it was said to those of old, "You shall not murder" […] But I say […]' (Mt 5:21–22).
- 'You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery" […] But I say[…]' (Mt 5:27–28).
- 'It was also said, "Whoever divorces his wife" […] But I say […]' (Mt 5:31–32).
- 'Again, you have heard that was said to those of old, "You shall not swear falsely" ... But I say to you ...' (Mt 5:33–34).
- 'You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye" ... But I say ...' (Mt 5:38–39).
- 'You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy" […] "But I say […]' (Mt 5:43–44).

Later in the same discourse, Jesus contrasts authentic piety with the practices of hypocrites:

- 'When you give to the needy, sound no trumpets before you as the hypocrites do […] But when you give to the needy […]' (Mt 6:2–3).
- 'And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites […] But when you pray […]' (Mt 6:56).
- 'And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites […] But when you fast […]' (Mt 6:16–17).

Jesus's teaching consistently employs contrast to enhance divine lived experiences. The same strategy is evident in Matthew's presentation of heaven (Clark 2017:68). To help his readers understand what heaven is, he sets up an opposition, or a contrast, to reveal what it is not. The opposite of heaven is communicated through the idea of earth. These contrasts are explicit, for example Jesus instructs his disciples not to practise their piety before others (on earth) but rather to seek reward from their[34] 'Father in heaven' (Mt 6:1–2). Similarly, he tells them, 'Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth […] but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven' (Mt 6:19–20; Clark 2017:69).

Forgiveness [ἄφες, ὀφειλέταις, 6:12]: Family ethics

Forgiveness is not always an easy disposition or practice; it requires divine wisdom, strength, and discipline. In Matthew 6:12, the imperative verb ἄφες [forgive] and the noun ὀφειλέταις [debtors] are probably used metaphorically in the Lord's Prayer for emphasis. Reciprocity, within the context of forgiveness, this is crucial for the restoration of both vertical (divine) and horizontal (human) relationships (M'bwangi 2022:22). The success of this fifth petition reflects progress: rather than asking God to act in general terms, it requests God to act specifically (Wilson 2022:148).

Daily bread [Τὸν ἄρτον ἡμῶν τὸν ἐπιούσιον δὸς ἡμῖν σήμερον, 6:11]: Family needs

This petition also requires metaphorical interpretation. It refers not only to daily food, but to all that is necessary for a dignified life,[35] both physical and spiritual[36] (Wilson 2022:148). The unique adjective ἐπιούσιος in the entire prayer, modifying 'bread', appears nowhere else in Greek literature apart from later Christian usage. Different meanings have been suggested due to the preposition ἐπι plus the noun οὐσια [being, existence]. The question that arises is whether it refers to 'the bread necessary for physical existence' or 'the spiritual bread from heaven'. Both interpretations may be valid. Thus, Jesus's disciples are invited to pray for their mundane needs of life – material, emotional, and spiritual.[37]

Protection of the family [ῥῦσαι ἡμᾶς ἀπὸ τοῦ πονηροῦ, 6:13]: Family protection

The Prayer concludes with a petition for the deliverance from evil: 'And do not bring us to the time of trial but rescue us from the evil one' (Mt 6:13). Earlier, in Matthew 5:38–48, Jesus had already prepared his followers for the understanding of the last petition (Mt 6:13). In these verses, Jesus elaborates on how to respond to violence through non-retaliation (Mt 5:38–40), nonviolent confrontation (5:40–42), love of enemies (5:43–44), and prayer for persecutors (5:44–48). These commands form part of the Sermon on the Mount, beginning in Matthew 5:21. Within this framework, Jesus clarifies that he has not come to abolish but to fulfil the Law. Through a series of antitheses, he contrasts his teaching with certain Torah prescriptions, admonishing his disciples that their piety must surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees (Mt 5:17–20).[38] Their rigid legalism stands in stark contrast to what Jesus outlined for his disciples. In Matthew 5:48, Jesus explains the entire section, 'Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Udoudom, Enang & Bassey 2019:1394).

The final petition of the Lord's Prayer asks to be rescued from the evil one [ῥῦσαι ἡμᾶς ἀπὸ τοῦ πονηροῦ]. As no specific identity is provided, this petition to best understood metaphorically. 'Protection' is a comprehensive safeguarding that extends throughout the lives of God's children. This protection includes both negative and positive embankments. From a negative perspective, it entails deliverance from all forms of evil powers, people, influences and addictions. From a positive perspective, it involves protection from becoming intellectually, emotionally, or physically harmed via the numerous daily relationships and encounters of life.

Conclusion

In this research, I have shown that prayer opens the way for divine lived experiences as the children of God glorify him, ('your name be glorified') participate in the coming of his kingdom ('your kingdom come'), and experientially enthuse the reality of his will ('your will be done') in their daily lives. The Lord's Prayer in the Gospel of Matthew has been used to verify this statement. Within the Gospel of Matthew, the theology of the Sermon on the Mount appears as the central doctrine. This doctrine culminates in the Lord's Prayer, where Matthew portrays Jesus as presenting the ideal prayer. The

34.'Beware of practicing your *piety* before others to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. [2] So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward' (Mt 6:1, 2).

35.It can include shelter, clothes, vocation, all daily accessories, health, et cetera.

36.This can include, love, forgiveness, fruit of the Spirit (Gl 5:22ff.) and the entire teaching of the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5–8).

37.Luz (2007:321) interprets this petition of the Lord's Prayer to refer to 'a situation of social need in which one cannot simply take for granted that there will be food for the next day'. He admits that 'the reference to "bread" can represent *pars pro toto* sustenance in general, although it should not be expanded for the inclusion of all the needs in life'. In contrast to Luz, Luther's view (1921:7) align more closely with the perspective of this author because of its metaphorical connotation. Luther broadens the petition to include food, clothing, health, house and home, a pious spouse and good children, trustworthy servants, godly and faithful rulers, good government seasonable weather, peace and health, safety, order and honor; true friends, faithful neighbours, and more. It is equally important to emphasise that humans also have responsibilities such as discipline, hard work, planning, and so forth.

38.According to the Synoptic Gospels, the following are proactive Christ principles to respond to various forms of violence: mediating peace; exerting positive influence; recognising *imago-dei*; cultivating non-retaliation; understanding reciprocation; thinking non-resistance; loving especially the enemy; being discerning and smart.

Prayer is impressive, while its associated lived experiences amplify, strengthen, and sustain the narrative of the Sermon on the Mount in a spirit of prayer. Such a claim is supported by, and analogous to, the content of the texts. Hence, the structure, metaphors, and theological depth of the 'Lord's Prayer' in Matthew, highlight the pray-er's communion with God as Father, fostering personal spirituality.

It becomes clear that, in various ways, the pray-er is drawn into and absorbed by the communion between the Son and the Father, insofar as Matthew's Prayer constitutes one fundamental and central role within this communion. 'Praying' this divine communion, encapsulated in the Prayer, enables the pray-er's participation in the unity between Jesus and the Father. The Lord's Prayer should thus be an outline for Christian prayer: encompassing praise to God, intercession for God's work in the world, daily needs, and requests for help in life's challenges, as well as sustaining relevant lived 'expressions' of prayer.

Prayer is not a vacuum or an escape from reality, and therefore in Matthew's Lord's Prayer, as Fosu (2023:115) points out, 'Jesus is not giving words to be repeated verbatim, but he rather provides a model and structure to shape all Christian prayer'. Consequently, the deeper underlying revelation and meaning of the metaphors in the Lord's Prayer encourages Christian believers to participate in the reality of God. Such participation fosters lived experiences of union with God as Father, drawing believers into the communion between Jesus and the Father.

In conclusion, the Lord's Prayer should be understood both as a guide for the formulation of prayer and, more profoundly, as a guide 'in the sublime life' towards a personal, lived experience of the Divine (cf. Luz 2007:313).

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