

### ***Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread***

In the name of him who is our Living Bread from heaven, dear friends in Christ: Thus far in our Lenten evening devotions we've taken a look at the first three petitions of the Lord's Prayer. And what we found is that together they correspond to our most important spiritual needs. That is to say, when we pray to our Heavenly Father, "hallowed be thy name", we're asking him to ensure that his Word is taught among us in all of its truth and purity because everything he does for us starts with our receiving his life-giving Word. When we pray, "thy kingdom come", we're asking that he send his Holy Spirit to illumine our dark hearts and minds so that we can understand and believe the Word we hear, because without the Spirit we wouldn't get it nor could we believe it. And then when we ask "thy will be done", we are praying that having received God's Word and Spirit we may be renewed by the power of the Gospel such that we have the desire and the will to act upon the Word and to live our lives under the direction of God's Holy Spirit.

These three together are no less than what it means to come to saving faith in Jesus Christ and remain there, for when our Father who delights to hear us pray for these blessings answers, we obtain the forgiveness of sins, the salvation of our souls, and eternal life in heaven with him. There is nothing more important for us – and so we can see a certain prioritization here. When Jesus teaches us to pray, he teaches us to ask for the first things first. It's just as we heard him say in the reading from Matthew's Gospel: "Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness" – because if you haven't got that, you haven't got anything – not even if you were to gain the whole world because you would do so at the expense of your soul.

But having taught us to ask first for what's needed for our eternal well-being, in the fourth petition Jesus now invites us to pray to receive also the things required to attend the temporal of needs of our bodies. Of course, someone might ask, "Why should we pray for what he's already promised to give us? After all, he said if we sought the kingdom and his righteousness *then all these other things we need would be added.*" Luther gives us the answer in the Catechism: the Lord would have us ask him for daily bread so that we focus our attention on him, the One who provides it, and remember to receive the gifts he grants with thanksgiving. By this including this petition Jesus reminds us that we are in every way *dependent* creatures. We need this reminder precisely because we like to imagine that we aren't dependent. In our sinful, fallen state, we puff ourselves up with notions about how *independent* we are. It makes us feel good to think that we can handle our own problems and provide for ourselves. We don't need any hand-outs from anyone, thank you very much. We can take care of ourselves. Hardly. Whatever "independence" we have is only an illusion based on the fact that God gives us the ability to satisfy a limited few of our needs. We usually forget that even this ability to do so comes from him. If ever he were to relax his steady hand of protection and provision over us, we'd lose everything in a flash. And if you don't believe me, ask an Old Testament guy named Job who found out.

So, it's in large part because of the weakness in our nature that wants to pretend to be self-sufficient and to take credit for what God provides to us out of the goodness of his heart that Jesus teaches us ask our heavenly Father to fill all of our bodily needs every day. We ask not because he's stingy and would begrudge us what we need, nor because he's forgetful and would fail to provide us daily bread if we didn't remind him. Rather, we ask because we are forgetful of where our blessings come from, and when we fail to ask, we forget the Lord who so generously gives us all we need. Or say it this way: we ask not because we would lose a gift by not asking; but because when we don't ask, we lose God.

So, it's right that we ask for him our daily bread; and when we do, we understand that bread here means a lot more than just the spongy white food product that comes in a plastic bag and that you make sandwiches out of. Again we can thank Dr. Luther for helping us to see that when Jesus says "bread" here, he means all the things we need to sustain our earthly lives to include food, drink, clothes, shelter, family, friends, livelihoods, livestock, you name it: all of our assets, abilities, and worldly possessions. And I want you to know that Luther is not taking liberties here. The Hebrew word for *bread* literally means "for life" or rather, since it's

plural, “for lives”; and so that’s the way the original disciples would have understood this petition – that it asks of God all the things we need for our lives.

But in his Large Catechism, Luther takes it a step farther by demonstrating that this petition is a whole lot broader than even that list we read together a while ago and that you memorized once upon a time. Showing remarkable insight, Luther says that when we pray to the Lord to provide for the needs of our bodies, we are praying also for him to watch over and prosper the *means* by which he provides the items that satisfy our needs. This would include primarily a sound government that maintains the conditions of peace and stability in which agriculture, business, and trade can all operate properly. In Luther’s day that sort of stability – especially for long periods of time – was problematic at best. Even today it’s problematic in many places on the globe. Wars, warlords, corrupt leaders, incompetent government officials, inefficient government programs, criminals and faulty justice systems, high inflation rates, financial depression, skyrocketing unemployment – any or all of these things (plus many others I haven’t named) can stop up the works and prevent people from getting their daily bread in one form or another. So, when we pray for our daily bread, we’re asking the Lord to spare us from all these evils and to ensure that the entire network of government, industry, agriculture, finance, justice, and security all work together as they should.

And with that in mind, we’re also praying in this petition for the Lord to bless the part (or parts) that each one of us plays it making it work as it should. You see, whatever you do, you are part of the machinery by which God gives others their daily bread. It’s probably easiest to see if you actually have employees who work for you – and if you do, part of your prayer here is that you would treat them fairly and pay them honest wages, because that’s how they get the means to buy their daily bread. But even if you don’t have employees, there are people who work for you and whom you pay to do their jobs: the police officer who keeps the city safe, the mechanic who services your car, the person who delivers your mail and packages, the teacher who educates your kids and grandkids ... you get the idea. The prayer includes all of them: that they do their jobs faithfully and with the skills God grants them and that they receive fair wages for their work. And then there are people who cannot work and who cannot earn their daily bread, so the prayer includes them too: that our hearts be moved to support them either directly or by giving to charities and other institutions by which God gives them their daily bread. And so I hope you can see that though this seven word petition seems rather small, its scope is enormous.

Its duration, however, is not. Jesus teaches us to ask for our daily bread; not tomorrow’s, not next week’s: just what we need for *today*. And there’s a reason for that which is illustrated very clearly for us in the reading we heard from Exodus. There we’ve got God’s people in the desert a few weeks after having been miraculously rescued from their hard bondage in Egypt. You may remember that the day before they left Egypt, the Lord ordered them to bake up some unleavened bread for their journey, which would be kind of like crackers – so it perfect for a trip through the desert. It would take less space to pack, it would be lighter because most of the water was cooked out, and it would keep better. And I suppose it worked great while it lasted; but now the supply is running low. And you can imagine how they must have been looking in their bags, counting the pieces, and calculating how much they had left. As the supply diminished they’d be trying to stretch it out, cutting back on their consumption; maybe skipping meals. But even these conservation measures only last so long. At last there’s little left but stale crumbs. And then the people cry out against Moses and the Lord, “Oh why, oh why did you bring us out here in the desert to starve to death? Better we had been struck down by the Lord in Egypt because then we would at least have died with full stomachs!” They begin to paint an especially rosy a picture of their former lives in Egypt: “We just lounged around the fireplace, stuffing ourselves with meat all the time.” Funny, that’s not what I remember reading. Seems to me there was something about bitter slavery, and cruel taskmasters, and crying out to the Lord on account of their misery.

But you see what they’re doing here: they’re saying, “When *we worked* for it, we ate. We took care of ourselves.” And up to this point they’ve been thinking the same thing. That’s what all their conservation measures have been about: “*We can manage. We can make do.*” So, the Lord deliberately brings them to the end of their means so that they will be forced to turn to him for help. Then he says, “I will rain down bread from heaven for you. I will provide you with all the food you want – but just one day at a time.” In the morning the ground is covered with the manna. The people are told repeatedly to take all they want for *today*; but no more. Many do that and are satisfied. Ah, but the temptation is too much for some people. They think, “Who knows when we’re going to see any food again? There’s plenty here now. Better stuff our supply bags just in case – you never know what hardship tomorrow might bring.” These who try to save are not learning the

lesson. They want to trust in the food they can see and their own clever efforts to save rather than in God who has promised to take care of them tomorrow. They find out the next day that what they've stored up has turned to foul, maggot infested corruption.

And I want you to see that the Lord is making a strong statement against idolatry here. Your god is not so much what you say you worship as it is whatever you trust in, whatever it is you turn to for help in time of trouble and look to in order to fulfill your needs. These people wanted to make the manna and their own "I know how to take care of myself better than the Lord does" wisdom their idol. And so, the Lord shows them exactly what kind of a god they're trusting in: something that's rotten and stinks. He's saying to them, "I want you to look to me. You're right. You don't know what's coming tomorrow; but I do, and I promise to take care of you then. Entrust your future to my care. Concern yourself with today and I'll make sure your needs are met tomorrow." It's a lesson he reinforced upon them for the next forty years – and it took some of them that long to learn it. And then there were some who never did.

When we pray for *daily* bread, we're asking that we learn the lesson. It's one that doesn't come easy to us. We're constantly worried about some day in the future when we might be left without. We fret wondering, "Will I have enough if this or that happens, or when I retire; or what will happen to me if I can't work anymore, or if my savings are wiped out, or if I live a lot longer than I expected, or ... whatever." And so we save and invest and buy insurance, trying to build up a nest egg big enough to ensure that we don't have to worry about the future anymore. The problem is that if that's the way you're thinking, your nest egg will never be big enough. If your trust is in the Lord, however, you know for certain that he will take care of you – and that's a lot more secure and certain than any nest egg could be.

And what's true of us individually is even truer of the church collectively. It's why I've often said that the church should be a "pay as you go" operation. The ministry here belongs to the Lord and he will ensure that his work here continues. He will provide the means as they are needed. One of the worst things that can happen to a church is for it to be sitting on a pile of money. It happens sometimes when someone leaves the church a large gift. Then its members sit down to try to figure out what to do with it. The obvious answer is to invest it in the church's immediate needs first and then its greater mission in the world. But then the thought comes up, "We may need this later on. We're getting smaller, the faithful old guard and big contributors are dying out, the younger folks aren't giving so much; we'd better stash this away for a rainy day." When that's the mindset, the death of the church becomes something of a self-fulfilling prophecy because it's no longer trusting in God but in its savings. Once the Lord has been dethroned, the church cannot long continue.

And please don't misunderstand me: I'm not saying that we shouldn't plan for the future or properly manage and invest our resources either for your personal finances or for the church. A farmer plants with the hope of harvest. That means it's right to look ahead and plan accordingly. What I am saying is that we should never *trust* in those plans because whether they succeed or fail, whether we have a bumper crop or lose it all, the Lord will ensure that we have our daily bread. He who has done so much to see to our eternal welfare – who gave his Son to secure it – will surely see to all of our temporal needs as well. We have his promise, and his Word cannot be broken. So we can be confident of it. And the Lord Jesus teaches us to pray so that we will learn this, never forget it, and give thanks to our heavenly Father through him for giving us our daily bread. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***