

BY ROBERT A. WEATHERS

# “OUR FATHER”

## JESUS’ PRAYER PRACTICES AND INSTRUCTIONS

**T**HE EARLIEST DISCIPLES walked with Jesus for more than three years. They ate countless meals with Him, watched Him heal the sick, save the lost, defend the Scriptures, and even raise the dead. Out of all the things they observed Him do, however, only one of His habits compelled them to request a personal tutorial: “Lord, teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1). As Andrew Murray summarized in his classic, *With Christ in the School of Prayer*, “They had been with Him and had seen Him pray...None could pray like Him.”<sup>1</sup>

But what motivated the request? What distinguished Jesus’ prayer life

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from the spiritual habits of the other religious leaders of His day?

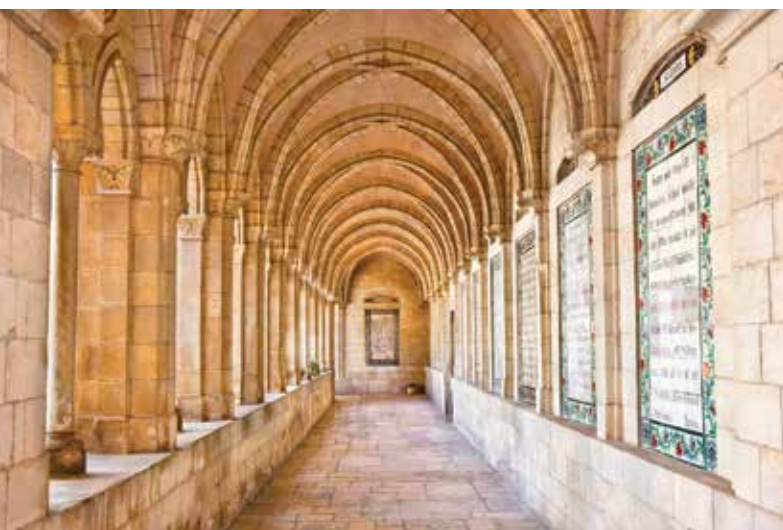
As one scholar explains, Jesus’ practices and teachings “reflect Jewish prayer patterns and beliefs” that were common for His time.<sup>2</sup> Jesus, however, led His disciples into a new and deeper experience with God through prayer. Jesus utilized the prayer practices of His day as a teaching tool for His followers; further, He transformed His disciples’ prayer

lives from formal rituals into intimate times of communing with God.

### Public Prayer

In the first century, “Jesus lived in a socioeconomic order governed by a religious calendar.”<sup>3</sup> This calendar prescribed times of communal prayer and individual prayer, and often provided the prayers themselves in the form of liturgies. A liturgy was a memorized and prepared formula for prayer, which by its nature was “fixed rather than spontaneous.”<sup>4</sup> Some of these liturgy-based prayers could be quite long. For instance, one branch of the Pharisees voiced a daily prayer that consisted of 18 petitions, and another prescribed 24 petitions. These petitions included expressions of praise, thanksgiving, hope, and even expectations of a future redemption.<sup>5</sup>

Some biblical scholars believe Jesus showed the influence of these liturgies in the “Lord’s Prayer,” which seems to echo the familiar pattern of “Jewish evening prayers” common in that day. This famous prayer, embedded in the Sermon on the Mount



ISTOCK PHOTO

**Left: Church of the Pater Noster (translated “Our Father”) on the Mount of Olives, overlooking Jerusalem. Early church tradition indicates this was where Jesus taught His disciples the Lord’s Prayer. In the church cloisters are tiled panels with the Lord’s Prayer offered in over 60 languages.**

**Right: Orthodox Jewish man praying at the Western Wall in Jerusalem.**

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO: BRENT BRUCE (60/0551)



(see Matt. 6:9-13), consists of seven petitions. The rhythmic pattern would have been easy for Jesus' Jewish listeners to comprehend and to practice since they were accustomed to prayers being threaded together with memorable petitions to God. In fact, Matthew's record of this prayer indicates that Jesus had a Jewish audience in mind.<sup>6</sup> Reflecting the influence of the Jewish liturgical prayers did not empty the prayer of meaning or authenticity. Instead the simplicity and vivid nature of Jesus' words made the prayer even more powerful to His disciples, who were accustomed to the long and formal nature of the Pharisees' prayers.

Among the liturgies that the Jews learned were prayers rehearsed for times of crisis or pivotal events in life. In addition, a staple of Jewish liturgies was the "blessings," rabbinic prayers for major occasions and life events. The Gospels record Jesus praying at such pivotal moments in His ministry, such as His baptism (Luke 3:21), His feeding the 5,000 (9:16), and blessing the disciples as they returned from their first mission in His name (10:1-21).<sup>7</sup> In this way, He utilized the pattern of His day, but He personalized it for His disciples.

## Personal Prayer

While Jesus made use of the liturgical prayer practices of His day, He transformed the personal prayer practices He had learned in His Jewish upbringing. Most first-century Jews had learned to view God as somewhat remote. For them the ritual prayer liturgies verified this feeling of distance between themselves and their God. Jesus' unique contribution was to personalize God, thus immediately drawing people closer to the God they had been distanced from in formal religious activity.<sup>8</sup>

Prayer was a daily part of Jewish life. Jewish men prayed in the synagogues and before meals; and they maintained habits of personal daily prayer in the morning, afternoon, and evening. Not surprisingly, then, the Gospels depict

Jesus in a regular habit of personal prayer. What is surprising, however, is that the Gospels are not more replete with these references, with stories about Jesus' day constantly interrupted by pauses for prayer.

What is more likely, however, is that, as with much of their reporting, the Gospel writers were selective and chose to paint an image of Jesus' prayer life that would give the reader an understanding that the Lord's prayer habits were both common and exceptional. He reflected His Jewish culture, but He was more intimate with God than anyone the disciples had ever met.

For instance, most Jewish men spent time in prayer in the morning. Their prayers would consist of a rehearsed liturgy, and once the prayers were complete their workday began. But the Gospels record Jesus rising "very early in the morning" to pray (Mark 1:35), leaving for a solitary place, and spending an extended period of time with God. By these details the Gospels demonstrate that "he was more pious than other Jews."<sup>9</sup> This piety was not fabricated; it arose from the depth of His relationship with His Father.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO: DAVID ROGERS (484/8)

## Intimate Prayer

Jesus' intimacy with God was also distinguished by the manner in which He addressed God. No doubt the disciples' desire to learn the practice of prayer



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO: KRISTEN HILLER (62/3333)

**Upper left:** A frieze from the middle section of a sarcophagus box dated to the 4th cent. A.D. The woman in the center has her arms raised in a praying gesture. Man on the left is recognizable as Paul because of the bald frontal head. Man on right holding the scroll or torch is likely Simon Peter. Behind is an unidentified young man.

**Left:** Woman praying at the Western Wall in Jerusalem. Visitors write prayers on slips of paper (called *kvitlach*) and wedge them into the cracks in the wall. Twice a year, under rabbinic supervision, the slips are gathered, put into bags, and buried east of Jerusalem in the Jewish cemetery on the Mount of Olives.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ MICAH KANDROS (6/12/41)

**Above: Altar and exposed rock inside the Church of All Nations (also known as the Church of the**

**Agony) that mark the spot where, according to tradition, Jesus prayed on the night He was arrested.**

from Jesus was impacted by the intimacy of His relationship with His Father.

By Jesus' day, the Jewish people had ceased to use the name of God for fear of taking His name in vain. Instead, the people had adopted the practice of speaking of God "by means of surrogate titles," pictured when the prodigal son speaks of "heaven," but does not use the name of God (Luke 15:18).<sup>10</sup> To refer to God as "Father" was not altogether uncommon for the Jews. The reference, however, was a formal title, commonly in the context of the liturgies.<sup>11</sup> Jews were not accustomed to the level of intimacy that Jesus modeled in His prayers, as indicated by a quick review of the Old Testament. Of the over 1,200 uses of the word "father" in the Old Testament, only 40 of those, or about 3 percent, in any way refer to God. But in the New Testament, over 60 percent of the over 400 uses of the word "father" refer to God.<sup>12</sup>

This extraordinary shift can be attributed to Jesus' relationship with

God the Father. In His context, Jesus not only called God His Father, "but what was even more astounding was that he taught his disciples to pray 'Our Father,'" <sup>13</sup> inviting His followers to replace formality with intimacy.<sup>14</sup> In fact, the only time Jesus did not begin a prayer by addressing God as "Father" was from the cross, when He quoted the Old Testament.

Jesus demonstrated this distinctive component of His prayer life in the lengthy prayer recorded in John 17, often called "the high-priestly prayer" because Jesus interceded for His disciples. The prayer is both reverent and intensely personal. It reflects the "crisis prayer" common to the Jews of His day, but is laced with the intimacy that was particular to Jesus' relationship with God. Throughout, Jesus addressed God as "Father," using this key address to precede six petitions in the prayer.<sup>15</sup>

For Jesus, and for His followers after Him, a relationship with God was an invitation to speak to God as a child would a parent. Jesus escorted His followers, then and now, away from a stagnant ritual and into a dynamic, personal relationship with a loving heavenly Father. ♣

1. Andrew Murray, *With Christ in the School of Prayer* (Pittsburgh: Whitaker House, 1981), 9.

2. I. Howard Marshall, "Jesus—Example and Teacher of Prayer in the Synoptic Gospels" in *Into God's Presence: Prayer in the New Testament*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 127.

3. Asher Finkel, "Prayer in Jewish Life of the First Century as Background to Early Christianity" in *Into God's Presence*, 53.

4. Martin G. Abegg Jr., "Liturgy: Qumran" in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, ed. Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 648.

5. Finkel, "Prayer in Jewish Life of the First Century as Background to Early Christianity," 62.

6. *Ibid.*, 62-63; Simon J. Kistemaker, "The Lord's Prayer in the First Century," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 21:4 (December 1978): 323-25.

7. Finkel, "Prayer in Jewish Life of the First Century as Background to Early Christianity," 62; Marshall, "Jesus—Example and Teacher of Prayer in the Synoptic Gospels," 118-19.

8. Gerald L. Borchert, *John 12-21*, vol. 25B in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2002), 187.

9. Marshall, "Jesus—Example and Teacher of Prayer in the Synoptic Gospels," 116.

10. Finkel, "Prayer in Jewish Life of the First Century as Background to Early Christianity," 52; Kistemaker, "The Lord's Prayer in the First Century," 324.

11. Kistemaker, "The Lord's Prayer in the First Century," 324.

12. Marshall, "Jesus—Example and Teacher of Prayer in the Synoptic Gospels," 127-28.

13. Borchert, *John 12-21*, 187.

14. *Ibid.*; Ken Hemphill, *The Prayer of Jesus* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2001), 32-33.

15. Borchert, *John 12-21*, 188; Kistemaker, "The Lord's Prayer in the First Century," 325; Andrew T. Lincoln, "God's Name, Jesus' Name, and Prayer in the Fourth Gospel" in *Into God's Presence*, 161.

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