

“Give us this day our --- bread”

The Place of the Petition for Bread within the Broader Structure of the Lord’s Prayer

In the earlier petitions of the Lord’s Prayer, we asked God for things which would bring him honor:

- his name to be set apart as holy and worthy of honor;
- his kingdom [i.e. rule] to come with power;
- his will to be done.

The concluding words “on earth as it is in heaven” may well be intended to refer back to all three of the above petitions (and not just the last, “Your will be done”) and bring the first half of the prayer to its conclusion.

In the second half of the Lord’s Prayer, we ask for things we need for ourselves--things that on a daily basis we find to be our most basic, pressing and immediate needs:

- bread
- forgiveness
- help when we are tempted

“Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well” (Mt. 6:33).

- 1 Peter 5:7: “Cast all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.”
- Ps. 55:22: “Cast your care on the Lord and he will feed you”
- Mt. 7:9: “Would he give his son a stone when he asks for bread?”
- Jer. 17:5,7: “Cursed is the man who places his hope on a man, and bases his strength on him and turns his heart from the Lord...Blessed is the man who has put his trust on the Lord and the Lord is his hope.”
- 1 Tim. 4:4-5: “For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.”

When the Lord’s Prayer was said by worshipers, it would conclude with words praising God (“Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.”).

- These words of praise (based on 1 Chron. 29:11-12) are not in Matthew or Luke, but were already used to conclude the prayer by the first half of the second century A.D. (as we can see from looking at the Didache or “Teaching of the Twelve Apostles”).

The Meaning of the Petition for Bread

Throughout the history of the Church, there have been different views of what “Give us our ---- bread” means.

This is due to

- different ideas of what “bread” means, i.e. what it is that we need from God most urgently (food/what sustains the body vs. supernatural, spiritual nourishment for our soul) and
- Matthew and Luke use a word here (marked by ---- above) that was apparently new (not used before?) and whose meaning cannot be known with certainty. How one understands this word will change how one interprets and understands the petition for bread.

To understand what the petition for bread means, we need look first at the slight differences between Matthew's and Luke's versions of this petition.

- Mt. 6:11: "Give us **today** our ---- bread"
- Lk. 11:3: "Give us **day by day** our ---- bread"

Next, we need to look at possible meanings of the word ἐπιούσιος (*epiousios*), which is the word of uncertain meaning represented by ---- above.

- One possibility is to see the word as connected with ἡ ἐπιούσα ἡμέρα "the coming day," in other words **I will depend on God for my immediate needs and pray today for tomorrow's bread.** I will take one day at a time and not get lost in big plans for the future or fears over what might or might not happen. Although it is evening and I have no food to eat for tomorrow and am under great pressure, still I will go beyond what I see and what I think I can expect and place my trust in God and talk to him about the things I urgently need.
 - This petition is the prayer of "a poor man who in the morning does not know how he will nourish himself and his family beyond the day, or of a traveler who begins his journey early without bread or money or purse, or even of a day-laborer who waits in vain for work in the market place" (Ernst Lohmeyer)
 - Ps. 145:15-16 LXX: "The eyes of all hope in you and you give them their food at the appropriate time. You open your hand and satisfy every living thing of [your] good pleasure."
 - Ps. 146:5,7: "Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord his God...who gives food to the hungry."
 - 1 Kings 17:4-6: "'You [sc. Elijah] shall drink from the brook, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there.' So he went and did according to the word of the Lord. He went and lived by the brook Cherith that is east of the Jordan. And the ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the brook."
 - "Keep thou my feet; I do not ask to see
The distant scene, one step enough for me" (Newman)

If this is the correct interpretation and ἐπιούσιος means "the coming day," it would explain why

- the version of the Lord's Prayer in Luke (Lk. 11:3) has "day by day" (looking from this day to the next one; compare Ex. 16:5 LXX, where the manna is given "day by day for the day") in place of Matthew's "today";
 - >The Latin translation of Lk. 11:3 (Old Latin and Vulgate) tries to make this point even clearer by translating ἐπιούσιος as *cotidianum* "day by day," so that in Latin Lk. 11:3 reads, "Give us from day to day (*cotidie*) our bread *day by day* (*cotidianum*)" (i.e. one day at a time).
- Jerome (*Comm in Mt.*) claims to have seen an Aramaic version of Matthew's Gospel where in place of the Greek word ἐπιούσιος the word *maḥar* ("tomorrow") was used to indicate the coming day. In Egypt, some of the

Coptic translations give a similar interpretation (e.g., the Middle Egyptian translation given in the Scheide Codex, which probably dates from the fourth or early fifth century and the Bohairic translation, which may be slightly later and became the version used in the worship of the Coptic Church).

- Cf. the saying of R. Elazar of Modin (commenting on the gift of manna which in Ex. 16:5 was to be gathered as “a matter of a day in its day”): “He who has what he can eat today and says, ‘What shall I eat tomorrow?’ is a man of little faith” (*Sota* 45b, cited in H.L. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, v. 1, 421)
- So also Mechilta on Exodus 16.4, 47b, similarly commenting on Ex. 16:5: “‘The portion of a day in its day’: He who created the day, created too the sustenance for the day.”
- a number of Greek Christian writers from the fourth century onward plus the Sahidic Coptic translation interpret ἐπιούσιος as meaning “coming,” i.e. the coming day. Cf. Prov. 27:1 LXX: “For you do not know what the coming day will bring.”

Some scholars think this unusual word was coined because it had a flexible meaning (“coming,” “at hand”) which made it suitable whether one prayed the prayer in the morning or in the evening. (Converts were often expected to pray the Lord’s Prayer twice a day, once early in the morning and once in the evening.)

- If one prayed the prayer early in the morning, one was asking God to supply one’s needs in the day that was just beginning.
- If one prayed the prayer in the evening, one was asking God to supply one’s needs in the next day, which was about to begin.

A second possibility (much less likely) is that ἐπιούσιος means **bread “for subsistence,”** i.e. the bread that is “needed and sufficient” (Prov. 30:8 LXX) to survive; cf. the Peshitta and Harklean Syriac which translate ἐπιούσιος as “needed”/“necessary.” (Compare also *Berakhoth* 29b: “May it be your will, O our God, to give to everyone his needs and to every being sufficient for his lack.”)

- The argument against this second possible interpretation is that Greek has several words that could indicate this idea, so it would have been unnecessary to invent a new word to express this idea.

Still the idea of distinguishing between basic needs and growing greeds is a good one:

- “We are commanded to seek what is necessary for the preservation of bodily existence, by saying to God, *Give bread*, not luxury, wealth, nor beautiful purple robes, nor ornaments of gold,—nor anything else by which the soul might be drawn away from its divine and worthier care, but—bread” (Gregory of Nyssa)
- 1 Tim. 6:8: “If we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.”
- To pray is “not to stretch wide the jaws like a wolf, but to *open the mouth like a sheep*” (Anton, citing Is. 53:7 LXX)

Prov. 30:7-9:

Two things I ask of you, O Lord;

do not refuse me before I die:

Keep falsehood and lies far from me;

give me neither poverty nor riches,

but only give me my daily bread.

Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you
and say, “Who is the Lord?”

Or I may become poor and steal,
and so dishonor the name of my God.

It is also worth noting that the needs we are asking for are ones we share with others:

“As the word *our* is plural, it denotes a fellowship of love, by which every believer prays not only for himself, but for all the members of his family, for other believers who are his brethren, and for all men without exception, that they may enjoy the necessities of life” (Herman Witsius)

“Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, ‘Go, I wish you well; keep warm and be well fed,’ but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?” (James 2:15-16; compare Elisha’s care for the widow in need in 2 Kings 4:1-7 and the distribution of food to the widows in need in Acts 6:1)

The next question, which Jeff will discuss, is what “**bread**” means.

Briefly, the challenge here comes from the fact that bread is not only

- the most basic and necessary food (an intensely important matter in the ancient world, where many people were often hungry much of the time, were often malnourished, and were never far from starvation) and
- the most basic necessities of life (Cf. Gregory of Nyssa: “When he says bread, he includes all that is necessary for the body”)

but also

- something shared with both friends and strangers, which established that one could be trusted and also invited the other person’s trust, so that the food become a tangible way that people entered into real communion with one another;
- recalls the heavenly bread, the manna, which God sent down to sustain his people, to show his trustworthiness and invite their trust, so that the manna served as something that brought God and his people together (see Ex. 16);
- the very powerful, intimate and joyful communion God would have with his people at the end of time when God was victorious over every evil (see Lk. 14:15: “Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!”)
- Jesus brings together all of the above ideas in Jn. 6 when he says that he himself is “the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world” (v. 33).
 - “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger” (v.35)
 - “This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die” (v. 50; compare v. 58)
- Jesus as he offers himself to his people through the supper he himself instituted (Mt. 26:26; 1 Cor. 11:24; compare Jn. 6:55-56).

○ God, whose blessed Son did manifest himself to his disciples in the breaking of bread;
Open, we pray, the eyes of our faith, that we may behold you in all your works,
through the same, Jesus Christ our Lord

--BCP, Monday in Easter Week

O Lord Jesus Christ, who has taught us that man does not live by bread alone:
Feed us, we humbly beseech you, with the true Bread that comes down from heaven,
even yourself, O blessed Savior, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, ever
one God, forever. Amen.

--BCP, Harvest Thanksgiving (1929 Scot)