

Misunderstanding The Lord's Prayer

There is a word in the Lord's Prayer that appears nowhere else in ancient Greek literature. Scholars have debated its meaning for two thousand years. And every Christian has been saying it their entire life without knowing.

The Lord's Prayer is the most recited prayer in human history: "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread" (KJV). Every Christian has said those words thousands of times. In church. Before meals. At bedsides. At funerals. In quiet moments alone. And hidden within one of the most familiar lines is a word that upends everything you thought the prayer meant.

"Give us this day our daily bread." The word translated as "daily" is the Greek word ἐπιούσιος (epiousios). That word appears nowhere else in the Bible, nor in any other ancient Greek text ever discovered. Not in secular literature. Not in inscriptions. Not in personal letters. Not in any document from the entire ancient Greek-speaking world. It is used only twice in all of human history. Once in Matthew 6. Once in Luke 11. Both times on the lips of Jesus.

The early church fathers did not know what it meant. Jerome, who translated the Bible into Latin in the fourth century, said he could not find an equivalent word in any language he knew. Origen, one of the greatest scholars of the early church, admitted he had never encountered the word. Modern translators rendered it "daily" because they had to render it as something. But "daily" is almost certainly not what it means.

The Greek word appears to be built from two roots. Epi, meaning "upon" or "above," and ousia, meaning "substance" or "being." So, it could be translated as: "Upon-substance," "Above-being," "Supernatural bread," "Bread of the coming age," and "Bread that transcends physical need."

Jesus was not asking for breakfast. He may have been asking for something that does not yet exist in the natural world, something beyond this age, something from the age to come. And He told His disciples to ask for it every single day.

But that is just one word in one line of the prayer. "Thy kingdom come." The Greek word for "come" here is ἐλθέτω (elthetō) — a specific verb tense that does not mean "may it come someday." It means "let it arrive now. Bring it here. Already."

Next is, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." That is not a request for God to override human behavior. In the original Greek, this is a single continuous thought, asking that the reality of heaven invade the earth and that the rules of the age to come break through into the present.

"Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." The Greek word for "debt" is ὀφείλημα (opheilēma). This word is a financial term, a ledger term, not a vague spiritual concept. Jesus taught His disciples to pray for their moral debts to be canceled, as a creditor cancels a financial debt.

"Lead us not into temptation." The Greek verb here is πειρασμός (eisenegkās) — "do not carry us into." It is not asking God to prevent temptation. It is asking God not to bring us into the coming trial, the testing, the tribulation.

Every line is deeper than it appears in English. Every phrase carries a meaning that two thousand years of translation have softened into something simpler than what Jesus actually said.

Most Christians have recited this prayer since childhood without ever being told that the words they say do not mean what they think they mean. That is the problem I discovered when my son asked me, "Dad, what does 'give us this day our daily bread' actually mean? We have bread. We have a whole loaf on the counter. Why do we ask God for something we already have?" I opened my mouth to answer him, but I stopped because he was right. I had said those words my entire life. I had taught on that prayer a dozen times. But I had never actually thought about what someone might see in one sentence.

Why would Jesus teach His disciples to pray for bread they already had? So I did some research. I opened my Greek Bible software (Logos) and searched for the word translated "daily." Every commentary I pulled up said something different. Every scholar admitted the word was a mystery. Origen, Jerome, and Augustine had all wrestled with this one word, and none of them had agreed on what it meant. It was not bread for the day. It was something else entirely. Something hidden in a word that Jesus may have invented specifically for this prayer.

After decades of teaching Scripture, no one had ever shown me what was actually there. I sat alone, thinking about how many thousands of times I had said those words. How many times had I taught them to others? How many Christians around the world were praying a prayer that none of us had actually translated correctly?

The Lord's Prayer is not confusing because it is unclear. It is confusing because we have been given a smoothed-over English version that has lost the weight of Jesus' actual words. The next morning, I began examining every book of the Bible. When I finished, I printed what I had discovered and gave it to my son. "Read what Matthew is saying first," I told him. "Then open to Matthew 6 and read the Lord's Prayer again."

He came back an hour later, eyes wide. "Dad. He wasn't asking for bread. He was asking for something from heaven. I never understood that before." I quietly began giving copies to people in my church, one at a time. Every single person said the same thing. "This is the first time I have ever understood what I was reading." I gave them what they needed: the roots. And once you have those roots, the Bible you thought you knew becomes something you have never actually encountered.

The Lord's Prayer is just one moment. There are thousands more waiting in the pages you have already read. The Bible is not confusing because it is unclear. It is confusing because we read it without the foundation that made it clear to the people it was first written to. The disciples heard Jesus teach that prayer and understood every word. They knew the weight of epiousios. They felt the tension of elthetō. They recognized opheilāmata as a ledger term. Every phrase landed with

the full force of what Jesus meant. We recite the English translation and miss almost all of it. This article returns that foundation to you.