

The Fellowship

LEARNING FROM THE PRAYER LIFE OF JESUS

BY ROBERT VELARDE

Isn't it interesting that out of all the disciples only one of them asked Jesus to teach them to pray? It sometimes seems the church is in a similar situation today regarding prayer. We talk about prayer, we study prayer, we say our prayers, but how many of us actually seek earnestly for God to teach us to pray?

Luke 11:1 reads, "One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples'" (NIV). [1] There's much to learn from this passage beyond the significant Lord's Prayer that follows it. For one, we learn that what sparked the unnamed disciples' curiosity to learn about prayer was the fact that he saw Jesus in prayer. We also learn that John the Baptist taught his disciples to pray and, as a result, the disciples of Jesus were also interested in learning to pray, or at least one of them was! Isn't it interesting that out of all the disciples only one of them asked Jesus to teach them to pray? It sometimes seems the church is in a similar situation today regarding prayer. We talk about prayer, we study prayer, we say our prayers, but how many of us actually seek earnestly for God to teach us to pray?

Why did Jesus pray?

One way we can learn to pray is by looking at the prayer life of Jesus. Although the Gospels don't provide a detailed biography of Christ, they do offer captivating glimpses into His prayer life. First, however, it will be helpful to answer the question, "Why did Jesus pray?" This is sometimes puzzling for Christians. After all, if Jesus is God, why did Christ need to pray? Theologically speaking, there are at least three reasons that Jesus prayed. First, Jesus prayed as an example to his followers. This is an example we continue to learn from, as this article demonstrates. Second, the Incarnation consists of both divine and human natures. From His human nature, it was perfectly natural for a Jewish believer such as Christ to pray. Third, the nature of the Trinity allows for communication between its members. As God the Son, Jesus could pray to God the Father.

Jesus and Prayer

Jesus prayed for others. In Matthew 19:13, we read, "Then little children were brought to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them." Despite the fact that "the disciples rebuked those who brought them," Jesus said the children should not be hindered "for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these" (v. 14). In John 17:9 we read, "I [Jesus] pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given Me, for they are Yours." This underscores the need for intercessory prayer. Jesus prayed with others. Luke 9:28 reads, "[Jesus] took Peter, John

and James with Him and went up onto a mountain to pray.” Jesus prayed alone, as we’ll read below, but He also knew the value of praying with others. Acts 1:14 underscores the importance of Christians praying with one another: “They all joined together constantly in prayer ...” Jesus prayed alone. Luke 5:16 reads, “But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.” As much as Jesus understood the value of praying with and for others, He also understood the need to pray alone. Psalm 46:10 reads, “Be still, and know that I am God.” Sometimes it’s important for us to “be still” before God, but the only way to do this, especially in our hectic culture, is to do so alone with God. Jesus prayed in nature. Psalm 19:1 reads, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.” What better place to commune with our Creator than among the wonders of nature? Luke 6:12 says, “One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray ...” He could have gone to a home, a synagogue or if He were near Jerusalem he could have gone to the temple to pray. But there were times when Jesus made the decision to pray where He was, which often happened to be in nature. We are surrounded by so much that is “man made” that sometimes it’s difficult for us to remember that this is not our world, but God’s world (Genesis 1:1, Psalm 24:1) full of wonders for us to enjoy. Jesus could pray as a sprinter or a marathon runner. The Lord’s Prayer is full of wisdom, but it is short enough to be easily memorized and serve as an example of a sprint rather than a marathon prayer. But Jesus also knew how to dedicate long periods of time to prayer. As we read in Luke 6:12, Jesus “spent the night praying to God.” We, too, need to be able to offer short prayers, as well dedicate long periods of our lives to prayer. Jesus prayed regularly. This insight is gleaned from a passage cited earlier, Luke 5:16: “Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.” The word “often” is not hidden, but makes it obvious that Jesus prayed regularly. Throughout the Gospels whenever we read of Jesus and prayer, it comes up regularly and naturally. It was simply a part of His worldview, integrated into every aspect of Christ’s life. Can we say the same about prayer in our life? The prayers of Jesus were heartfelt. Jesus did not pray in a cold, distant manner, but in heartfelt supplication, demonstrating empathy and a genuine love for God. This is demonstrated clearly in John 17, where Jesus prays for Himself, His immediate disciples, as well as for all believers. Jesus prayed based on His knowledge of God and His truths. The prayers of Jesus were based on God’s revealed truths and, as such, were in line with a solid biblical worldview. In John 4:24 Jesus said, “God is spirit, and His worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.” He also said, “the truth will set you free” (John 8:32), underscoring the importance of truth in the life of Jesus and, in turn, our lives. Proper prayer requires us to have a truthful understanding of God and what He has revealed to us through His Word. Jesus taught persistence in prayer. “Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up” (Luke 18:1). The parable Jesus shared is not meant to depict a pestering disciple who finally bugs God enough that He chooses to respond, but about persistence in prayer and waiting on God and His timing. Jesus knew that not all his prayers would be answered as expected. This is a difficult prayer lesson to learn, but the fact of the matter is that not all our prayers are answered in ways we expect. Even Jesus knew this hard lesson as he cried out to God the Father from Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-44). Three times Jesus prayed for God to allow an easier path, but Jesus knew, “Yet not as I will, but as You will” (26:39). Unanswered prayer is such a challenge to the Christian life that we’ll address the matter in more detail in another article in this series.



As You Will

When Jesus prayed in Gethsemane, “Yet not as I will, but as You will,” He offered a tremendous but seemingly simple insight into prayer: God is in charge. As we learn from the prayer life of Jesus – and there is much to learn – we need to keep this overarching principle in mind. A disciple asked Jesus, “Lord, teach us to pray,” (Luke 11:1) and in response was taught the Lord’s Prayer. But by studying the prayer life of Jesus, we can learn not only the important truths of the Lord’s Prayer, but so much more. Robert Velarde is author of *Conversations with C.S. Lewis* (InterVarsity Press), *The Heart of Narnia* (NavPress), and primary author of *The Power of Family Prayer* (National Day of Prayer Task Force). He studied philosophy of religion and apologetics at Denver Seminary and is pursuing graduate studies in philosophy at Southern Evangelical Seminary. [1] Unless otherwise noted all Scripture quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible.

What Does ‘Abba’ Really Mean?

By Karen Engle

When I’m in Jerusalem, I love watching gaggles of Jewish children walking alongside their fathers. And when I hear them call their daddy, my heart melts.

“Abba! Abba!”

At times I’m sure it sounds a lot like when my kids were little and needed my attention, calling out my second name incessantly until I responded: “Mom! Mom! Mom! Mooommm!”

But Abba? It’s different.

Origins of abba

Of Aramaic origin (seen in Dan 5:2, 11, 13, 18), abba parallels the Hebrew word *av* from where abba, or “father,” is derived. Some scholars consider it to be a colloquial term of familiarity that a young child would have used, similar to how American children use “papa” or “daddy.” Joachim Jeremias, a German Lutheran theologian, held that abba is a “children’s word used in everyday talk” and that it expressed the heart of Jesus’ relationship to God. He writes: “[Jesus] spoke to God as a child to its father: confidently and securely, and yet at the same time reverently and obediently.”

But is that the meaning of abba?

Abba in the New Testament

The term “abba” is only found in the New Testament three times—in Mark 14:36, Romans 8:15, and Galatians 4:6—and is used only by Jesus and Paul. In each instance, abba is transliterated into Greek and accompanied by the Greek translation of “father,” *ho patēr*.

Paul’s use

Paul used abba *ho patēr* when discussing the believer’s status as “sons” or “children” of God in Romans 8:15 and Galatians 4:6:

Paul links the use of abba *ho patēr* to the reception of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God indwelling the believer: “Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him” (Rom 8:9).

For Paul, then, the presence of the Spirit of God’s Son functions as proof of the believer’s adoption into God’s family and enables him to “call out ‘Abba Father’” (Gal 4:6–7 NLT).

In these verses, *abba ho patēr* is thus a term of familial intimacy—and one Paul says we can claim as believers.

Jesus' use

In Mark 14:36, just before his arrest, Jesus begins his prayer in Gethsemane with both “Abba” and “Patēr,” or “Abba, Father.”⁶ Jesus also used the word *patēr*, and in an intimate way, when addressing his Father in heaven in John 17:

Father (Patēr), the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. (v. 1)

When teaching his disciples how to pray in Matthew 6:9–13, Jesus addressed God as “our Father” (*Patēr hēmōn*, Matt 6:9; see also Luke 11:2) and called his disciples to do the same.

But in the second part of Matthew 6:9, Jesus also stressed a level of holiness: “hallowed be your name” (see also Luke 11:2).

There’s a sacredness in calling God Abba Father, a reminder of who we are addressing—the holy Lord of all.

And it seems some scholars agree.

What does abba really mean?

In his essay “Abba Isn’t Daddy” in the *Journal of Theological Studies*, James Barr writes:

If the New Testament writers had been conscious of the nuance of ‘Daddy’ they could easily have expressed themselves so; but in fact, they were well aware that the nuance is not that of ‘Daddy’ but of ‘Father’.” . . . [T]he semantics of *abba* itself [based on various evidences] all agree in supporting the nuance ‘Father’ than the nuance ‘Daddy’.”

It is fair to say that *abba* in Jesus’ time belonged to a familiar or colloquial register of language, as distinct from more formal and ceremonious language. . . . it was not a childish expression comparable with ‘Daddy’: it was a more solemn, responsible, adult address to a father.

Michael S. Heiser writes:

Scholars have demonstrated that (a) the Aramaic term *abba* was not exclusively used by children but frequently by adults in adult discourse, and (b) reducing the term to childish (though affectionate) prattle guts it of important interpretive nuances.

And Darrell Bock adds:

Believers may address God with the endearing term (*Abba*) because he is “our Father,” yet (we) should never use this term in the spirit of unsavory familiarity but with the full acknowledgment of his majesty.

Though *abba* is a term associated with intimacy and relationship, to address God as “papa” or “daddy” reduces his glory. God our Father is also Master of the universe, Creator of all things, Revealer of mysteries, and Judge of every hidden thing.¹² He is “the Lord, the Most High, is to be feared, a great king over all the earth” (Psa 47:2).

When children call their father’s “Abba” in twenty-first-century Jerusalem, it does indeed mean “daddy,” or “papa.” And that it’s the same Aramaic word Jesus and Paul used 2,000 years ago when addressing God the Father makes me pause. But we don’t need ‘*abba*’ to mean ‘daddy’ for the words to be marvelous on our lips. That the sovereign Lord of the universe would make us his children and allow us to call him by an intimate, familial name is astounding. It is better that ‘*abba*’ holds the intimacy of our adoption alongside the holiness of God. We don’t want a Father like our fathers. We want a perfect Father who is high and lifted up.