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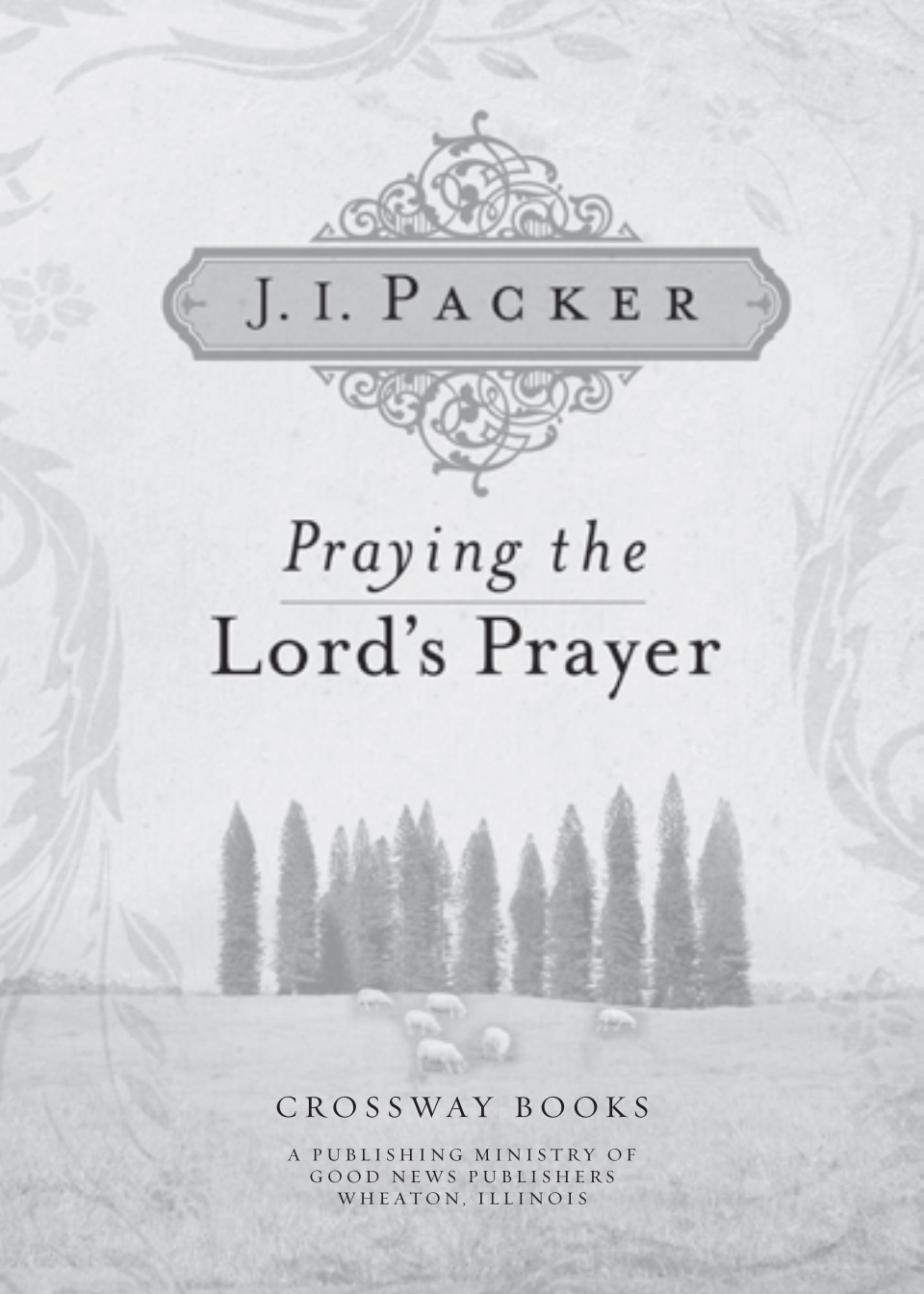
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J. I. PACKER

*Praying the*  
Lord's Prayer



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*Praying the Lord's Prayer*

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# The Lord's Prayer

*"Pray then like this:  
Our Father who art in heaven,  
Hallowed by thy name.  
Thy kingdom come.  
Thy will be done,  
On earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread;  
And forgive us our debts,  
As we also have forgiven our debtors;  
And lead us not into temptation,  
But deliver us from evil.  
[For thine is the kingdom and the power  
and the glory, for ever. Amen.]"*

MATTHEW 6 : 9 - 13

(Material in brackets is found in some ancient manuscripts, though not all.)



P R E F A C E

Three venerable formulae together add up to Christianity: the Apostles' Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord's Prayer, summarizing respectively the Christian way of believing, behaving, and communing with God.

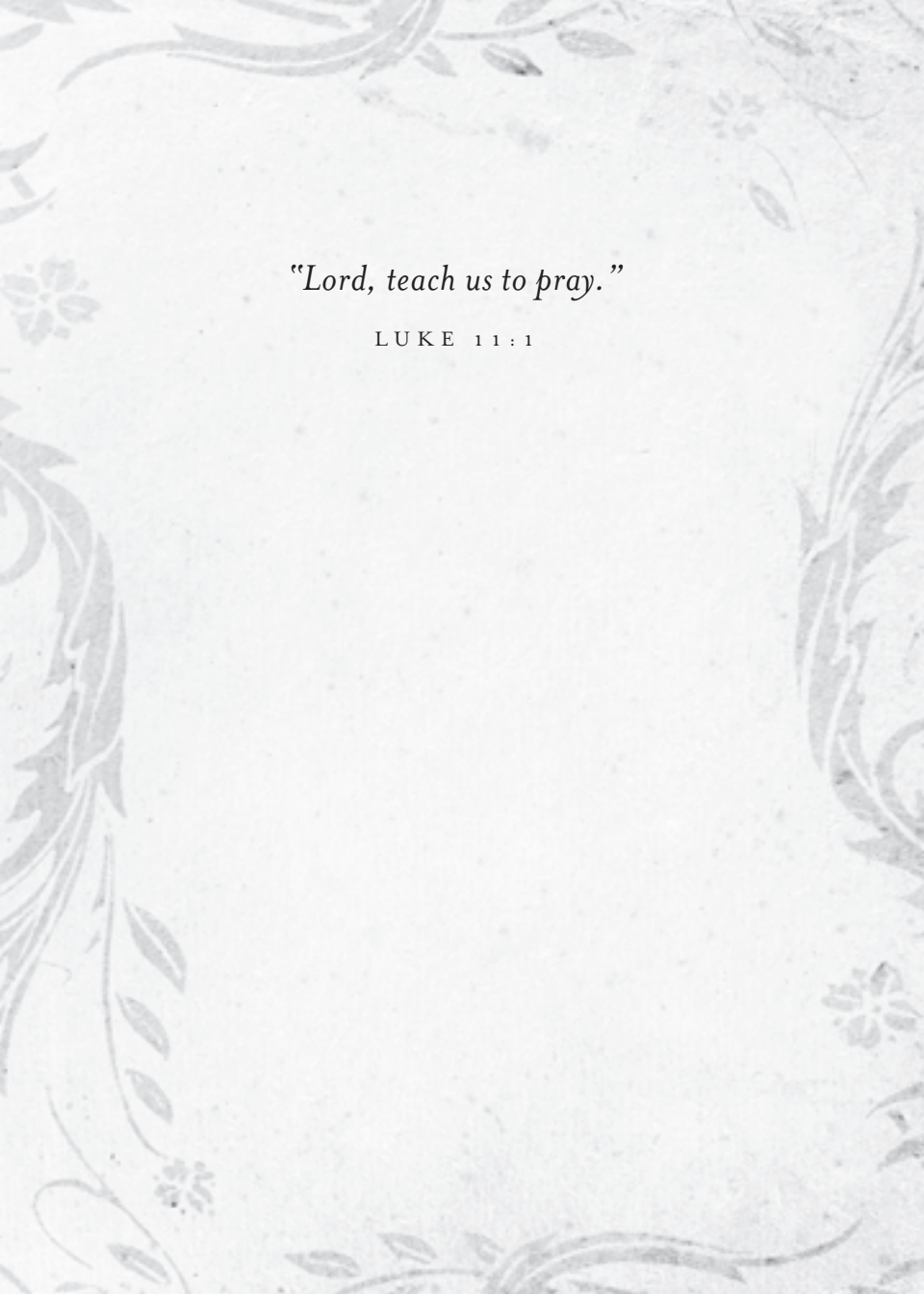
The Lord's Prayer in particular is a marvel of compression, and full of meaning. It is a compendium of the gospel (Tertullian), a body of divinity (Thomas Watson), a rule of purpose as well as of petition, and thus a key to the whole business of living. What it means to be a Christian is nowhere clearer than here.

Like other Reformation catechisms, the Anglican Prayer Book Catechism centers on the three summaries. On the Lord's Prayer it says:

*Question:* What desirest thou of God in this prayer?

*Answer:* I desire my Lord God our heavenly Father, who is the giver of all goodness, to send his grace unto me, and to all people, that we may worship him, serve him, and obey him, as we ought to do. And I pray unto God, that he will send us all things that be needful both for our souls and bodies; and that he will be merciful unto us, and forgive us our sins; and that it will please him to save and defend us in all dangers ghostly [i.e., spiritual] and bodily; and that he will keep us from all sin and wickedness, and from our ghostly enemy, and from everlasting death. And this I trust he will do of his mercy and goodness, through our Lord Jesus Christ. And therefore I say, Amen. So be it.

What these words give us a glimpse of, the following studies will try to spell out.

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*“Lord, teach us to pray.”*

LUKE 11:1



## When You Pray

Praying to God is a problem for many today. Some go through the motions with no idea why; some have exchanged prayer for quiet thought or transcendental meditation; most, perhaps, have given prayer up entirely. Why the problem? The answer is clear. People feel a problem about prayer because of the muddle they are in about God. If you are uncertain whether God exists, or whether he is personal, or good, or in control of things, or concerned about ordinary folk like you and me, you are bound to conclude that praying is pretty pointless, not to say trivial, and then you won't do it.

But if you believe, as Christians do, that Jesus is the image of God—in other words, that God is Jesus-like in character—then you will have no such doubts, and you will recognize that for us to speak to the Father and the Son in prayer is as

## Praying the Lord's Prayer

natural as it was for Jesus to talk to his Father in heaven, or for the disciples to talk to their Master during the days of his earthly ministry.

### TWO-WAY CONVERSATION

Conversations with parents or wise friends whom we love and respect, and who are ready to help us by advice and action, feel neither pointless nor tedious, and we gladly give time to them—indeed, schedule time for them—because we value them, and gain from them. This is how we should think of times of communion with God in prayer. When the Methodist saint Billy Bray said, as he often did, “I must talk to Father about that,” it was of praying that he spoke.

Does God, then, really tell us things when we pray? Yes. We shall probably not hear voices, nor feel sudden strong impressions of a message coming through (and we shall be wise to suspect such experiences should they come our way); but as we analyze and verbalize our problems before God's throne, and tell him what we want and why we want it, and think our way through passages and principles of God's written Word bearing on the matter in hand, we shall find many certainties crystallizing in our hearts as to God's view of us and our prayers, and his will for us and others. If you ask, “Why is this or that happening?” no light may come, for “the

secret things belong to the LORD our God” (Deuteronomy 29:29); but if you ask, “How am I to serve and glorify God here and now, where I am?” there will always be an answer.

## MADE TO PRAY

It is not too much to say that God made us to pray, that prayer is (not the easiest, but) the most *natural* activity in which we ever engage, and that prayer is the measure of us all in God’s sight. “What a man is alone on his knees before God,” said the saintly Murray McCheyne, “that he is—and no more.”

Perhaps Jesus’ disciples felt this when they made their momentous request (have you ever echoed it?), “Lord, teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1). Jesus must have rejoiced to be asked this. In the manner of a good teacher, however, he controlled his feelings and gave a matter-of-fact answer. “When you pray, say . . .”—and for the second time in his public ministry he gave them the form of words that we call the Lord’s Prayer (Luke 11:2-4; cf. Matthew 6:9-13).



*Prayer is the most natural activity in which we ever engage, and prayer is the measure of us all in God’s sight.*



“Say . . .” Did Jesus just intend that they should repeat the words, parrot fashion? No; but that they should enter into the sense. “Say,” we might say, means “mean!” This prayer

## Praying the Lord's Prayer

is a pattern for all Christian praying. Jesus is teaching that prayer will be acceptable when, and only when, the attitudes, thoughts, and desires expressed fit the pattern. That is to say: every prayer of ours should be a praying of the Lord's Prayer in some shape or form.

### LEARNING TO PRAY

"Experience can't be taught!" The phrase comes from a brochure on youth employment, but it is as deep a truth about prayer as it is about wage-earning skills. Praying, like singing, is something you learn to do, not by reading books (not even this one!), but by actually doing it; and it is so natural and spontaneous an activity that you can become quite proficient in it without ever reading up on it. Yet, as voice training helps you to sing better, so others' experience and advice can help us pray to better purpose. The Bible is full of models for prayer: 150 patterns of praise, petition, and devotion are contained in the Psalter, and many more examples of proper praying are recorded too, along with much teaching on the subject.

We should certainly not content ourselves with parroting other people's prayers, nor would God be content if we did (for what parent could be happy if his child only ever spoke to him in quotations, thus limiting his conversation

to the reciting of other people's sentiments?). But as another pianist's interpretation of a piece can help a budding musician to see how he can best play it (not, perhaps, in quite the same way), so we are helped to find our own way in prayer by seeing how others have prayed, and indeed by praying with them. And overarching everything we have the Lord's Prayer as our guide.

As analysis of light requires reference to the seven colors of the spectrum that make it up, so analysis of the Lord's Prayer requires reference to a spectrum of seven distinct activities: *approaching* God in adoration and trust; *acknowledging* his work and his worth, in praise and worship; *admitting* sin, and seeking pardon; *asking* that needs be met, for ourselves and others; *arguing* with God for blessing, as wrestling Jacob did in Genesis 32 (God loves to be argued with); *accepting* from God one's own situation as he has shaped it; and *adhering* to God in faithfulness through thick and thin. These seven activities together constitute biblical prayer, and the Lord's Prayer embodies them all.

So the Lord's Prayer should be put to service to direct and spur on our praying constantly. To pray in terms of it is the sure way to keep our prayers within God's will; to pray through it, expanding the clauses as you go along, is the sure way to prime the pump when prayer dries up and you find yourself stuck. We never get beyond this prayer; not only is

## Praying the Lord's Prayer

it the Lord's first lesson in praying, it is all the other lessons too. *Lord, teach us to pray.*

### FURTHER BIBLE STUDY

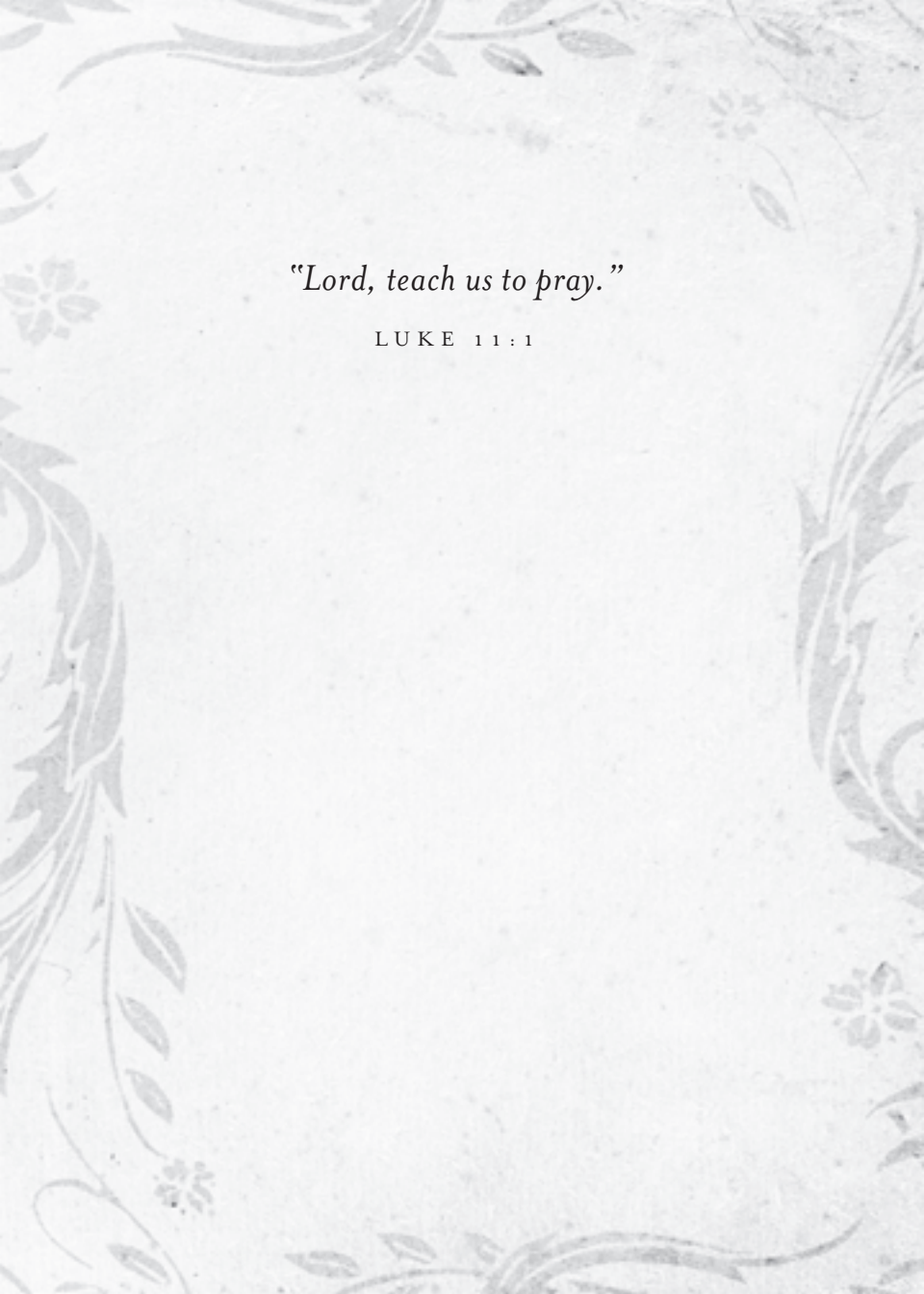
*The naturalness of prayer:*

- Psalms 27; 139

### QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT AND DISCUSSION

- How does one's view of God affect one's view of prayer?
- Why is prayer "the most natural activity in which we ever engage"?
- In what sense should every prayer be a mirror of the Lord's Prayer?





*“Lord, teach us to pray.”*

LUKE 11:1



## Pray Then Like This

Pray then like this.” Thus Jesus introduced the Lord’s Prayer in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:9-13). Clearly, then, the prayer is given to us to be a pattern for our thoughts in prayer as well as a set verbal form. What does the pattern contain? Here is a bird’s-eye view.

The address to God (invocation) with which the prayer opens is full of meaning. It must have startled the disciples, for in Judaism calling God “Father” was something one did not do. Jesus directs us, however, to do it—in other words, to seek access and welcome to God’s presence on the ground that we are children in his family and he looks on us with a father’s love. Then with this we are to link the thought that our Father is “in heaven”—in other words, that he is God, sovereign and self-existent, the God who is both *there* and *in charge*. Fatherly love on the one hand and transcendent great-

## Praying the Lord's Prayer

ness on the other are two qualities in God that the rest of the prayer assumes at every point.

Then come three God-centered petitions, voicing together the attitude required by what Jesus called “the great and first commandment—you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart . . .” (Matthew 22:38, 37).

The first petition is that God's “*name*” should be “hallowed.” *Name* in the Bible means “person,” and the hallowing of God's name means the acknowledging of God as holy through reverence for all his revelation and responsive worship and obedience.

The second petition is that God's “*kingdom*” should come. God's “kingdom” means the public display of his ruling power in salvation, and the prayer for his kingdom to come is a plea that his lordship might be seen and submitted to, and his saving grace experienced, all the world over, till Christ returns and all things are made new.

The third petition asks that God's “*will*” may be done—that is, that all his commands and purposes may be perfectly fulfilled.

## GOD FIRST, THEN MAN

Three man-centered petitions follow. By putting them after requests for the exalting of God, the prayer reminds us that

*Pray Then Like This*

we are to ask for the meeting of our particular personal needs *as a means to our Father's glory*, and not in any spirit of trying to bend God's will to our own. We are told to ask for provision of bread, pardon of sins, and protection from temptation and the tempter ("evil" means "the evil one"). All our needs are in principle covered here—all need for material things; all need for spiritual renewing and restoring; all need for guidance and help.



*The prayer reminds us that we are to ask for the meeting of our particular personal needs as a means to our Father's glory, and not in any spirit of trying to bend God's will to our own.*



The "praise ending" ascribes to God the "kingdom" (that is, it hails him as God on the throne), the "power" (that is, it adores him as the God able to do all that we ask), and the "glory" (that is, it declares, "we praise thee, O God" here and now). Though early, the manuscripts make it clear that this is not from Christ's own lips—but there is no denying that it fits!

## GOD LEADS THE CONVERSATION

When we talk to parents and friends about our anxieties and problems, looking to them for help, they often have to

## Praying the Lord's Prayer

take over leadership in the conversation in order to give it a meaningful shape that our own higgledy-piggledy minds have denied it. We all know what it is to have been pouring out our troubles in full flood and to be pulled up by “Wait a minute; let’s get this straight. Now tell me again about so-and-so. . . . Now tell me how you felt about it. . . . Then what’s the problem?” Thus they sort us out.

We need to see that the Lord’s Prayer is offering us model answers to the series of questions God puts to us to shape our conversation with him. Thus: “Who do you take me for, and what am I to you?” (*Our Father in heaven.*) “That being so, what is it that you really want most?” (*The hallowing of your name; the coming of your kingdom; to see your will known and done.*) “So what are you asking for right now, as a means to that end?” (*Provision, pardon, protection.*) Then the “praise ending” answers the question, “How can you be so bold and confident in asking for these things?” (*Because we know you can do it, and when you do it, it will bring you glory!*) Spiritually, this set of questions sorts us out in a most salutary way.

Sometimes when we pray we feel there is nobody there to listen and are tempted to think that our feelings tell us the truth. What finally dispels this temptation, under God, is a fresh realization (Spirit-given, for sure) that God is actually questioning us in the way described, requiring us to tell him

honestly how we think of him and what we want from him and why.

That this is so is part of the teaching of the Lord's Prayer, which from this standpoint is like a child's picture containing a hidden object. At first you look and don't see the object; then it hits you, and every time you look at the picture after that it seems to jump out at you. The hidden object in this case is the God who asks the questions to which the Lord's Prayer, clause by clause, is the proper set of answers. And it is only when you see this that you can use the pattern prayer in the way that its Author and Teacher intended.

## FURTHER BIBLE STUDY

*A model prayer:*

- John 17

## QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT AND DISCUSSION

- On what basis should we seek access to God's presence? Do you think you have such access yourself? What are your reasons for saying yes or no?
- What does the Lord's Prayer have to do with loving God with all our heart?
- Illustrate ways in which the Lord's Prayer might be needed to reshape prayers that we might make.