

THE FATHERS ON THE FUTURE

A 2nd-Century Eschatology for the
21st-Century Church

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Go Deeper Excursus 4 “Your Will Be Done” as “Your Kingdom Come”

Robert Yarbrough writes, “Foundational to the Lord’s Prayer and by implication all Christian prayer is recognition of God’s reign, the yearning to see it come to pass, and an understanding of his reign as God’s very will being done on this earth precisely as we know it is in his transcendent dwelling place.”¹ In keeping with this reading, many have seen the third petition of the Lord’s Prayer, “may your will be done,” as appositional to the second petition, “may your kingdom come.” That is, God’s kingdom comes when—and to the degree that—God’s will is accomplished on earth and in heaven.

For example, Grant Osborne views the third petition as summing up the previous two—ultimately eschatological but also having a present application.² He writes, “At present we cannot introduce his perfect will and lead the people of this world to embrace it. But we can proclaim his name and guide those around us to follow his will more fully. This will prepare for its finalization in the future, when God intervenes in world history to lead his creation to his completed will.”³ Though some commentators place greater emphasis on the personal, spiritual, and realizable application of the manifestation of the kingdom in doing God’s will,⁴ even these acknowledge a full answer to the prayer awaits a future coming of the eschatological kingdom.

Andrew Mitchell’s application of an either/or approach provides a helpful corrective to readings of the Lord’s Prayer that emphasize too much the present, spiritual, and realizable facets of the kingdom petitions, but its rejection of a both/and approach is unwarranted given the

¹ Robert W. Yarbrough, “The Kingdom of God in the New Testament: Matthew and Revelation,” in *The Kingdom of God*, ed. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, *Theology in Community* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 114.

² Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, vol. 1, ed. Clinton E. Arnold (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 228.

³ Osborne, *Matthew*, 229. Cf. Robert H. Mounce, *Matthew*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 56.

⁴ E.g., R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 246–47.

application of other petitions in the prayer to the present life and the general teaching of the realized and realizable kingdom in the present age.⁵ Though Mitchell provides a helpful survey of interpretations of the kingdom petitions, he seems to imply—perhaps unintentionally—that some commentators present a progressive manifestation of the kingdom *as opposed to* a future fulfillment; in fact, many of those he cites opt for a both/and approach. He writes, “The third petition is a prayer that God’s purposes come to pass. It is not a prayer for the increase in obedience to God’s moral will.”⁶ Mitchell does acknowledge that these are not mutually exclusive when he writes, “The gradual interpretation is not at odds with the eschatological, since obedience is an ingredient of God’s rule. The second and third petitions are believed to be co-interpretive, demonstrating the ‘already-not yet’ dynamic of the kingdom. Thus, they are considered simultaneously eschatological and ethical.”⁷

The claim by some that the aorist imperative must refer to a single event rather than iterative is tempered by the example of 2 Esdras 10:14, “As for him who has set up foreign women—let them come (ἐλθέτωσαν) at appropriate times as instructed. The petition in Psalm 35:12, that the foot of arrogance not come, is not intended to fend off such a threat once, but ongoing. Cf. also the ongoing and iterative intentions in Psalm 54:16 and 118:77. The intention of the aorist must be discerned through its context.

That the phrase “your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” is appositional to “your kingdom come” seems most probable for the following reasons.

Luke’s Gospel includes only the second petition of the prayer, “may your kingdom come.” If Luke is drawing on an earlier, fuller Matthean version of the Lord’s Prayer, then Luke may have regarded the single petition, “may your kingdom come,” to be sufficient without the explanatory third petition. Or, if Matthew was drawing on a shorter version similar to Luke’s, then Matthew’s third petition could have been added as an explication of the second. Understanding the phrases as appositional explains the inclusion or exclusion of the phrase in the two versions of the prayer.

Furthermore, the prayer of the second petition, that God’s kingdom would come, implies a heavenly origin. God the Father, as established in the opening address, is “in heaven.” And throughout Matthew, God’s kingdom is heavenly in origin. Thus to pray the third petition that God’s will would be done on earth and in heaven makes perfect sense as an explanation of the coming of the kingdom—an extension of God’s perfect heavenly will into the earthly realm. Robinson rightly notes, “The phrase, then, simply explains the previous words, and whether the *Reign of God* be introduced by the rending of the heavens and the bursting of the earth, or whether

⁵ See Andrew Mitchell, “Your Kingdom Come, Your Will Be Done: A Study of Matthew 6:10,” *BBR* 30.2 (2020): 208–230.

⁶ Mitchell, “Your Kingdom Come,” 209–10.

⁷ Mitchell, “Your Kingdom Come,” 214.

it be slowly evolved by a process of moral and spiritual illumination in mankind, its nature is the same—the supreme dominance of the will of God.”⁸

Many commentators see the second and third petitions—and even the first—as all pointing in the same eschatological direction. So also, Spurgeon maintains the tension between the ultimate eschatological fulfillment and the present potential realization: “We long for the coming of King Jesus; but meanwhile we cry to our Father, ‘*Thy kingdom come.*’ We desire for the supreme will to be done in earth, with a cheerful, constant, universal obedience like that of ‘heaven.’ We would have the Lord’s will carried out, not only by the great physical forces which never fail to be obedient to God, but by lovingly active spirits; by men, once rebellious, but graciously renewed.”⁹

Scholarship has long shown that the Lord’s Prayer has some similarities with its contemporary Jewish prayers, and as such place the original sense of the Lord’s Prayer in an eschatological context: “In both the Kaddish and the Lord’s Prayer, the petitions to God have an eschatological flavor. They ask God to usher in the end-time era of salvation in which all of life will reflect God’s purposes.”¹⁰ In this sense, it is appropriate to regard the “kingdom of God” or “kingdom of heaven” as having both eternal/heavenly and temporal/earthly aspects. In the latter form, the kingdom of heaven is manifested when God’s will is carried out in personal, corporate, social, cultural, and even political realms. Thus one can and must speak of God’s kingdom being more or less “present” as God’s will is accomplished on earth.

Ultimately, the petition for the kingdom to come and for God’s will to be done on earth as in heaven is eschatological—when the divine will for individuals, society, government, and all creation is finally realized. Yet this eschatological hope is partially realized in the past and present through individual believers submitting to God’s rule in their own lives and as this conformity to God’s will transforms families, neighborhoods, and society in general. Lenski puts it this way:

This kingdom is the heavenly reign and rule of God through Christ in the gospel of grace. Where Christ is, there this kingdom and rule is, and, of course, also those who through him participate in the blessings of this rule and kingdom, the kings and priests unto God. “Let it come” means by its own inherent power, and the aorist is effective. . . . This aorist is not a reason for thinking only of the consummation, the kingdom of glory. This consummation includes all that precedes it in the rule of grace, which finally shall become the rule of glory.¹¹

⁸ Theodore H. Robinson, *The Gospel of Matthew*, ed. James Moffatt, Moffatt’s New Testament Commentary (New York; London: Harper and Brothers, 1928), 50–51.

⁹ C. H. Spurgeon, *The Gospel of the Kingdom: A Commentary on the Book of Matthew* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1893), 34.

¹⁰ Richard B. Gardner, *Matthew*, Believers Church Bible Commentary (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1991), 119.

¹¹ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1961), 266–67.

Gardner also notes the logical relationship of the second and third petitions and their dual application—present and future: “When God’s rule is fully established, then the request of the third petition will also be granted: The *will* of God will *be done on earth as it is in heaven*. God’s will can refer either to God’s purpose for history (cf. Isa. 46:10, 13; 1 Macc 3:60; Matt. 26:42) or to God’s will for our lives in an ethical sense (cf. Ps. 40:8; Matt. 12:50). Here again it is likely that both meanings are intended.”¹²

Stuart Weber writes, “This prayer is not only for the future coming of Christ (although this can be included), but it is also for the spreading of God’s kingdom around the world through his kingdom servants. Therefore, it is a prayer that we, his servants, would be faithfully obedient and effective in living his kingdom principles in our own lives and then spreading the kingdom through our actions and words.”¹³ On the third petition, he notes, “This request assumes that God’s will is done in heaven, but not yet on earth (in the same full way). Sin and rebellion are absent in heaven, but hindrances are present on earth. This is another request for the spreading of God’s kingdom rule on earth, primarily through the church as the agent of the kingdom.”¹⁴

The definition of the kingdom of God as “God’s will done on earth as in heaven” does not excuse us from unpacking the various ways in which this is partially accomplished in the past and present and will be fully accomplished in the future. In fact, this simple definition provokes us to embrace all the various ways in which God accomplishes his will on earth in the story of creation, fall, redemption, and ultimate restoration. This is not far from Alva McClain’s general definition of the kingdom as “*the rule of God over His creation*,”¹⁵ but the definition that takes “God’s will being done on earth as in heaven” appositionally has the benefit of reflecting a passage of Scripture that itself defines (or at least describes) God’s kingdom and allows for the dynamic of a more-or-less visible manifestation of that kingdom in the earthly realm. “God’s will being done on earth as in heaven” also accommodates Hoekema’s definition of the kingdom of God as “the reign of God dynamically active in human history through Jesus Christ, the purpose of which is the redemption of God’s people from sin and from demonic powers, and the final establishment of the new heavens and the new earth.”¹⁶

¹² Gardner, *Matthew*, 119.

¹³ Stuart K. Weber, *Matthew*, vol. 1, Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville: B&H, 2000), 82.

¹⁴ Weber, *Matthew*, 1:82. Cf. R. T. France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 1, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1985), 139

¹⁵ Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom: An Inductive Study of the Kingdom of God* (Chicago: Moody, 1968), 19.

¹⁶ Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 45.