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DATE: June 6, 2026
SERIES: The Shape of Prayer
MESSAGE: Finding Calm in the Father's House
PASSAGE: Matthew 6:9
SPEAKER: Mark Mathewson

Anxiety is an increasing problem in our world today, and it not only affects the world around us, but even those in the church. Now, I'm not a sociologist, I'm not a psychologist—those disciplines are out of my lane. I'm trained as a philosopher and theologian. However, I think, from what I've read and seen and heard that the underlying causes of anxiety can be expressed in three questions.

The first of those is, am I alone? I think a lot of our anxiety is generated from the fear of loneliness. Perhaps the fear of losing significant relationships. Or perhaps the fear of not being accepted or recognized or being able to fit in.

I think it's the second question is, will I have all that I need? I think economic insecurity is something that also generates our anxiety. Will I be able to pay for my rent or mortgage this next month? What if I lose my job? If I'm looking for a job, what if I can't find one? How will I pay the bills? Will I have enough for retirement? What about an education?

And the third question, I think, that expresses the underlying cause of anxiety is, am I safe? We often fear the harms that are in our world. We see wars and threats of wars, violence in our community. There are pandemics, there are health concerns—the threat of cancer, for example, seems to be everywhere. We fear personal attacks that harm us.

Now, the first line of the Lord's Prayer, I think, addresses these questions of anxiety. And it's our task tonight, to reflect on that first line, Our Father in heaven, and hopefully we will be able to see that in those few words, six words in the Greek text. Some English translations it's just four words. But in those very few powerful words, we find, I think, the antidote to anxiety. So let's look at this first line of the Lord's Prayer. Again, Matthew chapter 6, and we find this first line in verse 9. "Our Father in heaven." Or maybe your translation has "our Father who is in heaven." And I want to start with the subject of that phrase, Father.

Now, probably you already have rolling through your mind thoughts and concepts of what a father is or what a that word father reflects. And it might be negative or positive, perhaps, based upon the relationship you had with your father. But let me ask you for a few moments tonight that you try to set aside what you think about a father and what a father should be. And I want us to see if we can try to think how a Jewish person in Jesus's day might have thought—what they would have thought, perhaps—when they heard this word, "Father."

Now, of course, like you and me, they would have thought of the person, along with their mother, who gave them life. But for those coming from that, their tradition, their Jewish Israelite tradition, the word father would have also signified the patriarch of an extended family or even a clan. Now, the extended family was known as the "bet ab." That's a Hebrew word. I have it up here for all of you ancient language nerds like me. In Hebrew, "bet" is a word for house, and "ab" the "b" sounds like a "v." "Ab," is a shortened form of Abba. You probably heard that Hebrew word for "father."



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And so we have the father's house. Okay? You've probably heard, you know, Beth El—Bet El—house of God. Bethlehem—bet, house; lehem, bread—house of bread. So here we have the father's house. In fact, I want you to say that with me, we're going to say "bet ab," okay? Say it with me, "bet ab." Now, you probably didn't come tonight expecting to learn a little Hebrew, did you? No extra charge, by the way, for this.

But this is an important concept that we see even throughout the Hebrew Bible, and it would have been very meaningful to the people in Jesus's day. Because the father, the patriarch of a "bet ab" or a father's household, was responsible to use all the resources at his disposal to provide for, to protect, the members of the clan or the extended family. That was his responsibility. He was also responsible to make sure that order was brought to the family.

But there's another important responsibility that the father of a "bet ab" had, and that was to bring back a family member who had found themselves outside of the household. Because being outside of the household was to be in a very dangerous situation. I had no protection. I had no way to provide a good life for myself. This is why God repeatedly tells his people to look out for the widow, the orphan, and the foreigner among them, because those people didn't have a "bet ab." They didn't have a family household to belong to, and thus didn't have the protection and provision. And if a family member, due to whatever reason, became a person outside of the "bet ab," the father was to do whatever he could to bring them back into that family.

And they had a word for this. It was called redemption. Redemption meant to bring somebody back in to the protection and provision of the "bet ab" of that family household. You think of a story like Hosea the prophet, who's told to marry, again, a prostitute, and she's with him for a while, and then she ends up back on the streets. And she ends up being sold in the marketplace. And what does Hosea do? He goes down to the marketplace and he buys her back and brings her back into his household. That's redemption.

Perhaps one of the most touching stories that gets across this idea of the protection and provision in the father's house, or a "bet ab," comes from 2 Samuel chapter 9, a story of David and Jonathan's son, Mephibosheth. Remember the story? Saul was the first king of Israel. Jonathan was his son. And Jonathan and David had a very close friendship. Well, in battle, Saul and Jonathan die, and in the course of that battle, in fleeing, Mephibosheth was just a very young boy and was being carried, and his nurse stumbled and fell, and he was injured and was lame in both feet. Well, after the battle, and after King Saul died, many of David's men went and killed all of the relatives of Saul, because you didn't want anybody else to have a claim to the throne.

Then chapter 9, David wonders, is there somebody from Jonathan's household that he could show mercy to—love to? And it just so happened that Mephibosheth was around. And so David summons from Mephibosheth to come to the palace and Mephibosheth knows that he's going to die. He's been the only one left of Saul's household and now they found him and they're going to kill him. And so he's brought to the palace, but David says to him, don't be afraid. And what does David do? He brings Mephibosheth into his household, and we're told he ate at the king's table like a son. That's what it meant to be in a "bet ab," their father's house.

When we pray "our Father," we should think of God as a patriarch of his household, of his "bet ab." Jesus used this concept. If you remember in John 14, Jesus says, "my father's house has many rooms." Okay, Jesus is thinking "bet ab." He's thinking of this concept, and it's a place of provision and protection. And we should think of a God who rescues people—those who were his enemies—and brings them into the protection and provision of his household. And in our Heavenly Father's "bet ab," that's just what we have.



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And it's interesting that two of the requests in this very short prayer have to do with just that. Verse 11 has to do with provision. "Give us this day our daily bread." Verse 13 has to do with protection, right? "Deliver us from the evil one." And so when we pray "our Father," that word "Father" should call to mind those concepts of redemption, protection, and provision. If you are a follower of Jesus, you have been redeemed. You have been brought into the Father's house, and it's there that you find a place of his provision and his protection. I think that's what those first century Jewish people would have been thinking when they would say "our Father," when they would hear these words. And so when we hear that word "Father" in this prayer, our mind should be saturated with these ideas of redemption, provision, and protection—of being in the "bet ab" of our heavenly Father.

Well, what gives us confidence that our Father can really provide and protect like he says? Well, the clause that modifies this term "father" gives us the answer. You also didn't know you were going to get a grammar lesson tonight, did you? But what is that modifying clause? It's "in heaven." Our Father "in heaven."

Now, something that doesn't come across in our English translations is the fact that "heaven" in the Greek text is in the plural. So probably the best rendering of this opening line would be our father, the one in the "heavens." Now, why is that important? It's likely that we would be misled if we are thinking in the "heaven." We think typically of heaven as someplace far, distant, way out there, and we don't even know where it is. But the fact that we're told to pray our Father in the "heavens" signifies two very important features of our Father that I want us to take a few moments to understand. Because in the "heavens" stresses both the authority of the Father and also his intimate presence.

Well, how so? Theologians and philosophers use two terms to talk about God's relationship to the universe. They say he is "transcendent"—and by that, we mean that God is a separate being from the universe. He stands over and above it because he created it. He sustains it. God isn't part of our universe, okay, he's "other than." He's "different than" that. And that is what gives him the authority to accomplish what he wants to do. So the fact that he's in the "heavens" signifies that he has a place of authority—he stands above the universe.

But the fact that this is in the plural, our father in the "heavens," also signifies his "nearness." And the theological technical term for that is that God is "imminent." And imminence means close or close at hand. And so if we think of God in heaven as being far out there somewhere, that gives us a misunderstanding of our God because he's not somewhere far out there, he's intimately with us. In the Hebrew thought, there were several levels or spheres of heaven. So our immediate atmosphere was considered one heaven, another heaven was where spirit beings lived, and then another heaven was where God lived.

You remember, you know, the biblical writers talk about being "caught up into the third heaven." Well, the idea of God being in the "heavens" means that he is fully present in every sphere of the universe. And not just present in the sense that he's there, but he's intimately involved. And that even includes our sphere. And so, our father, the one in the 'heavens," suggests that he has the authority and the ability to provide and protect, and to redeem lost people. But it also signifies the fact that he is very near us. He's close at hand, caring for and loving his people. So we have a father who cares.

Now, I love something that Moses tells the Israelites just before they're going to go into the land of promise. Remember, they've wandered through the wilderness. They've made one attempt where they didn't believe or trust God because there are giants in the land, so they're doing more wandering, but they're just about ready to cross the Jordan River, go into the land of promise. And the book of Deuteronomy is all about Moses's pep talk to them. Because Moses is not going to get



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to go in the land. But at one point he tells them this to distinguish them and their God from all the pagan nations that they're going to encounter when they get into the land of Canaan. And in Deuteronomy 4, verse 7, Moses says this: "What other nation is so great as to have their gods near to them the way Yahweh, our God, is near us whenever we pray to him?"

I just love that. That's our father who's in the "heavens." Yes, he has the authority, the ability, the power to accomplish what he needs to accomplish, but he's also intimately present with us. The Father who is in the "heavens."

Well, there's one last term here that we want to talk about, and that is that pronoun "our." Now, in our day and a culture we are very individualistic, right? Even our technologies are expressed this way—you know, we have an iPhone, an iPad, not an "our" phone, and an "our" pad, right? I have a medical app, "my" chart, right? But, it's important that it is "our" father. And again, today we might teach people to pray "my" father, and that would be, you know, consistent with our culture. But, we're told to pray "our" father.

And that is important because this is a community prayer. This is a family prayer that we are to pray together. And it reminds us that as a son or daughter of the Father, I never have to have the sense that I'm alone. Not only, as we just talked about, is our Father present intimately with us, but I'm part of a family. I'm part of that "bet ab" where I have brothers and sisters surrounding me. So we have a father who has adopted us into his family, into the "bet ab," where we can experience all the blessings and benefits that come with that, including the blessings and benefits of having others with us.

I also find it interesting that in the two prayer requests that we looked at in verses 11 and 13, about provision and protection, it's often the case that God, our Father, uses other members of the household as a means to provide and protect. And probably you can think of times where the Father has answered your requests for provision or protection that have been through another person in the family of faith. And it's one more reminder that I'm not alone. I do fit in with a community of people in the father's house. So, we can pray with confidence this prayer, knowing, again, that "our" father has the ability to provide, protect—and also that we are part of a family that he often uses to meet some of those needs.

We now return to the three questions that we started with.

Am I alone?

Will I have everything that I need?

And am I safe?

Well, once more, we have a father who has the authority and the ability to provide and protect. So we can pray with confidence.

We have a father who cares for us and wants to hear from us. And as Deuteronomy 47 tells us, that when we pray, he is near to us. That's the kind of father we have. I mean, it's amazing! The creator of the universe is close to us and desires to hear us pray to him. Amazing. Amazing.

And we have a father who has adopted us into his "bet ab," who has redeemed us, who's rescued us, from an unsafe, unproductive world, brought us into his family. And we find a place where we can be cared for by him and others, a place where I can care for others in the father's house, and a place where together we can seek to do the will of the Father.



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Perhaps this is why Jesus, later on—Nathan read these passage earlier, part of it, immediately following this prayer, a few verses later—Jesus will instruct his disciples not to worry. Why? Because they have a Father who's in the heavens. And what an encouragement that should be for us.

So I hope that now when you pray this opening line, it's not just an opening line—a throwaway line just to kind of get us into the meat of the prayer—but that you will find great comfort and significance in those very few words: "Our Father, the one who is in the heavens."

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