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**LENSES OF
CONTEXT
FOR THE
LORD'S PRAYER**

A Companion Resource to
Bringing Heaven Here

THE CASE FOR CONTEXT ¹

The Bible is utterly fascinating. It's the most beautiful, compelling, challenging, unified, and life-giving story in human history. It has the unparalleled power to transform lives and set us on a path of adventure and purpose—not just for the world to come, but for the most meaningful life here and now. But if we're honest, many of us haven't always experienced the Bible this way. Some of us find it confusing or overwhelming. Others find it boring, outdated, or even weaponized in ways that cause harm.

We believe the Bible should be energizing and transformative, so why doesn't it always feel that way?

The biggest reason is that we often read the Bible without its context. And nowhere is this truer than with the most well-known prayer in human history: the Lord's Prayer. Its very familiarity actually works against us. Because we've heard it so many times, we assume we know what it means, yet in doing so, we miss its depth. But when we recover its original context, the prayer comes alive in dramatic and powerful ways, revealing itself as a condensed summary of Jesus' entire life and ministry, making it the most important passage for understanding who God is, why Jesus came, and what our purpose is here on earth.

Most of us, however, still pray the Lord's Prayer with clouded vision. We can recite the words, but their depth escapes us. That's exactly why one of Jesus' strangest miracles offers such a powerful picture.

Mark's Gospel tells the story of a blind man brought to Jesus for healing. Jesus spits on the man's eyes, lays his hands on him, and asks if he can see. The man replies, "I see people; they look like trees walking around." His vision is only partially restored. Then Jesus touches him again, and this time the man sees everything clearly (Mark 8:22–25).

Strange, right? But it wasn't a mistake. Jesus never acts by accident. He was making a point: the man could see, but his vision was still blurry. And that's exactly where the disciples were spiritually. They had been with Jesus, seen his miracles, even picked up basketfuls of bread after he fed thousands—but they still didn't fully see who he was or what he was doing.

And that's often us with the Bible—and with the Lord's Prayer. We know the words, but without context, we're half-blind to what it means. We catch glimpses of meaning, but we don't see clearly. When we place the prayer back in its original world, though, the fog begins to clear. We'll see it for what it really is: Jesus' masterclass on life in God's kingdom, designed not just to be recited, but to reorient hearts, reshape desires, and refocus lives around God's reign breaking into the world.

¹ We abridged this e-book from Brad Gray's *The #1 Mistake Most Everyone Makes Reading the Bible*—4th Ed. e-book and adapted it specifically for the Lord's Prayer, augmenting what's written in *Bringing Heaven Here*. To obtain a free copy, visit walkingthetext.com.

WHY CONTEXT MATTERS

The Bible wasn't written in English, and it wasn't written in a modern culture. It's a sophisticated library of ancient literature written over 1,500 years, on three continents, by more than 35 authors—each with a particular time, place, and audience in mind. These were real people in real places, facing real situations at real times. The biblical writers usually didn't stop to explain those details—they expected their audience to already know them.

When we ignore context, we end up reading the Bible through our own lens—21st-century assumptions, Western individualism, personal histories, and cultural biases. It's like trying to hear a symphony while wearing noise-canceling headphones: we might catch a few notes, but we'll miss the music.

Think about how many of us instinctively pray the Lord's Prayer in the singular: *My Father, give me my daily bread, forgive me my debts.* But in context, every line is plural: *Our Father. Give us. Forgive us. Deliver us.* In Jesus' world, prayer was deeply communal, shaping a people, not just individuals. When we miss that context, we shrink the prayer down to a private transaction, instead of seeing it as a radical vision of life together under God's reign.

Or take the line, "*Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*" Without context, it sounds like a vague hope for the future. But set against the backdrop of Roman emperors, Herodian rulers, and rival kingdoms pressing in around Galilee, it becomes explosive. Jesus was teaching his disciples to pledge allegiance to God's kingdom above every competing power. In context, the words aren't just comforting—they're defiant, courageous, and world-changing.

CLEARER VISION

Context clarifies our vision. It guards against bending Scripture to fit our own agendas and empowers us to see the richness of God's story, the brilliance of Jesus' teaching, and the relevance of Scripture for our own lives. We see the richness of God's story, the brilliance of Jesus' teaching, and the relevance of Scripture for our own messy lives.

Context doesn't make the Bible more complicated—it makes it more beautiful. It's like wiping the fog off a window so we can see the landscape beyond. When we place the Bible back in its original world and ask, "What did this mean for them, then?" we are far better equipped to ask, "What does this mean for us, now?"

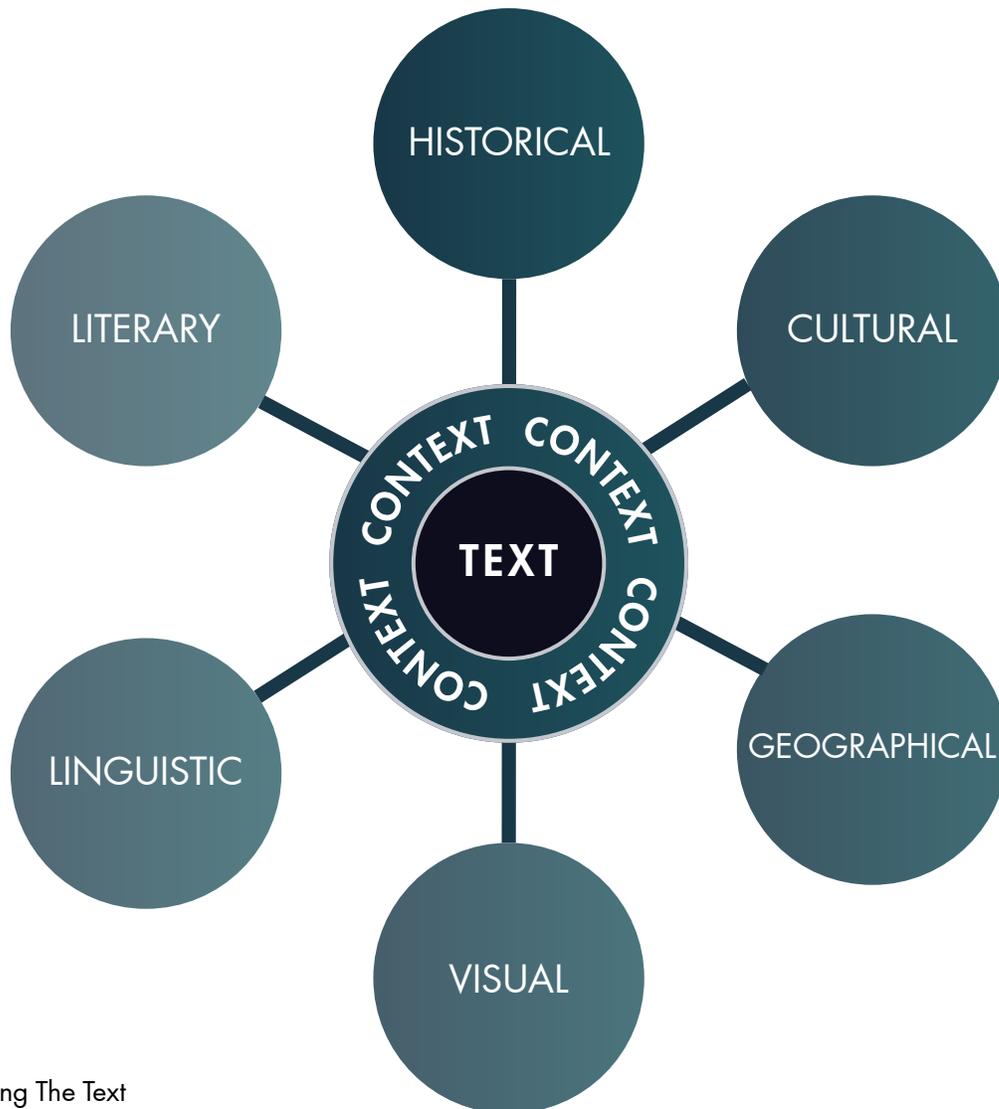
That's the case for context. It's not an academic exercise. It's the path to seeing the Bible clearly, loving it deeply, and living it faithfully.

WHAT'S NEXT

So what does it actually look like to engage the Lord's Prayer in its original context? That's where things get exciting. Over years of study and teaching, we've developed a simple but powerful framework—six “lenses of context” to help us see the Bible as it was intended. Each lens—whether historical, cultural, geographical, visual, linguistic, or literary design—offers a fresh perspective that sharpens our vision. Sometimes, these different lenses overlap. That's how context works, but together they give us a way of reading that makes the Bible come alive.

In the pages ahead, we'll walk through each of these lenses, exploring examples from the Lord's Prayer, and offering questions to help you begin experiencing Scripture with clearer vision and deeper joy.

6 LENSES OF CONTEXT



HISTORICAL

The Lord's Prayer begins with the words, *Our Father*. For us, that sounds familiar—even potentially comforting. But in the first century AD, it was bold, even dangerous. In the Roman Empire, Caesar claimed the Latin title *Pater Patriae*—"father of the country." To call God Father was not just intimate; it was defiant. It was a way of saying Caesar isn't ultimate. God is.

And everyone in Jesus' world knew what kind of "father" Caesar was. One of the main ways he played the role was through the *Annona*, the daily grain allowance for citizens in Rome. But Rome didn't grow enough grain for itself. It filled its storehouses by stripping grain from the lands it conquered—especially Egypt and Judea. Caesar fed some of his children by taking from others.

Now hear the contrast: Jesus teaches his followers to pray to a Father whose kingdom doesn't exploit, but provides. A Father who gives daily bread not by extraction, but through generosity. To pray this prayer was to reimagine dependence itself—not as submission to Caesar's control, but as freedom under God's care.

This is why historical context matters. These were real people, living under the heavy hand of the Roman Empire. The Gospel writers rarely stopped to spell this out—they assumed their audience already knew the world behind the words. When we recover that world, we see the sharp edge of Jesus' teaching: calling God Father wasn't only intimate, it was subversive.

For Jesus' audience, bread was survival. Nearly 90% of the people in the empire lived at or below subsistence levels. No savings account. No safety net. Every day was a question of whether there would be enough. And into that fear Jesus invites radical trust: *Give us this day our daily bread*.

Context changes everything. Instead of hustling to secure more and more, the Lord's Prayer calls us back to the basics and to what's essential: *Father, please give me what I need today*. It's a posture of trust that reshapes our striving, softens our fear, and frees us from confusing provision with control.

If historical context makes such a difference, the natural next step is to learn how to ask the right questions whenever we open the Bible. Here are some good questions to get started:

HISTORICAL

- *What time period are we dealing with?*
- *What's happening on the world stage?*
- *What's happening at a regional level?*
- *What's happening at the particular location of this story?*
- *What's happened in the past that's informing these present events?*

CULTURAL

Whenever we step into a culture radically different from our own, we feel the shock. The food tastes strange, the customs surprise us, and the values can feel jarring to us. Reading the Bible is no different—it's a cross-cultural experience. For those of us shaped by modern Western culture, entering the world of Scripture means learning to see through very different eyes.

In Jesus' day, Jewish sages and rabbis gathered disciples who longed to imitate them in every possible way.

About two centuries before Jesus, Rabbi Yose ben Yoezer captured this spirit when he wrote:

“Let your house be a meeting place for the Sages, and sit in the dust of their feet, and drink in their words with thirst.” (Mishnah Avot 1:4)

To follow a rabbi was to walk so closely behind him that his dust clung to your clothes—a badge of honor proving your devotion. So, in Luke 11, when one disciple asked, “Lord, teach us to pray,” he wasn't looking for tips on making prayer more personal. He was asking Jesus for his prayer—the very words Jesus himself prayed—so he could live in his rabbi's dust.

The Lord's Prayer was more than a model. It was a condensed summary of Jesus' entire life and mission, words he lived out daily. It was normal for Jewish sages to give their disciples a set prayer to pray. For generations, Jewish men and women have learned to pray by praying the Psalms. This is exactly where a cultural gap comes into focus. In our world, we often assume prayer is only authentic if it's spontaneous. In the Jewish world, prayer was authentic when it aligned your heart with God's. Praying a rabbi's words. wasn't about reciting them mindlessly—it was about aligning your heart with his and committing your life to embodying those words.

That's the gift of the Lord's Prayer. When Jesus said, "Pray like this" (see Matthew 6:9; Luke 11:2), he called them to take up his prayer as their own so their hearts would be formed by his.

If cultural context mattered that much for them, it matters for us too. To see Scripture clearly, we must learn to ask:

CULTURAL

- Is this a Jewish context? Roman? Egyptian? Babylonian?
- How is that cultural setting shaping the story?
- What cultural clues are stated outright?
- What cultural values—like honor and shame—are running underneath?
- What assumptions from my own culture might distort my reading?

GEOGRAPHICAL

Location. Location. Location. In the Bible, geography is much more than a simple background detail. It often reveals why the story happens at all. The Lord's Prayer is no exception.

Jesus taught his disciples the Lord's Prayer as part of his Sermon on the Mount. By placing the scene on a mountain, Matthew intentionally echoes another story—when God instructed his people how to live, and called them to reflect him before the watching world.

After rescuing the people from Egypt, God brought them to Sinai where Moses gave them the covenant—a new way of living. Then God planted Israel in Canaan, what biblical geographers call “the land between.” It was the crossroads of the ancient world, linking trade routes, bridging seas, and channeling cultures into constant collision. It's as if God was saying, “I want you here, where the nations pass through. Be my living message—so when people encounter you, they'll encounter me.”

Just as Moses gave Israel God's instructions for living, Jesus now gave his disciples a vision of life in God's kingdom. And he did it in Galilee—another “land between,” buzzing with cultural traffic along the International Coastal Highway.

Traders, travelers, and ideas streamed through its towns. Around the Sea of Galilee you could find Torah-keepers, Roman soldiers, Herodian supporters, angry zealots, and pagan pluralists—all colliding in one small region.

Right there, in the middle of all those competing voices, Jesus gave his disciples a prayer. He didn't equip them with arguments for every ideology; he anchored them with

words that would steady their hearts and guide their feet: *Our Father in heaven, holy be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done.*

The prayer was their compass in a world of swirling ideologies. That's the power of geography. When we see where Jesus was and what his disciples faced, the Lord's Prayer becomes more than familiar words. It becomes a lifeline—rooting us in God's story and training us to live faithfully no matter what cultural crosscurrents we face today. And this is why asking geographical questions is so important. Paying attention to the lay of the land can open new meaning in the text that we'd otherwise miss. Here are some geographical questions to help bring understanding to any Biblical text:

GEOGRAPHICAL

- *Where are we on a map?*
- *What do we know about this location?*
- *Are we dealing with mountains, valleys, deserts, etc.?*
- *Is this an urban or rural setting?*
- *Who lives there? What are they like?*
- *Who's the ruling authority?*
- *What's the flow of traffic like around the area?*
- *Has anything happened in this location before? (Geography holds memory, and stories often connect through place.)*

VISUAL

We’ve all heard the phrase, “A picture is worth a thousand words.” Images don’t just help us understand; they help us remember. Communication expert Carmine Gallo notes that when you only hear information, you’ll likely recall about 10% of it three days later. But add a picture, and your recall rate can soar to 65%.²

Jesus, the master teacher, understood the power of visuals. He constantly drew on everyday images—seeds and soil, sparrows and lilies, lamps and coins—to plant truth deep in the hearts of his listeners. His teaching wasn’t abstract but grounded in what people could see and imagine. And because these images were woven into daily life, they served as constant reminders of his words and instructions.

That’s what makes the setting of the Lord’s Prayer so striking. Imagine standing on a hillside above the Sea of Galilee. To one side rose the kingdom of Herod Antipas, centered in the capital city of Tiberias (named after Caesar) glittering with wealth acquired through compromise with Rome. To another lay the territory of Herod Philip, a hotbed of violent zealot ideology. Across the lake, the Decapolis announced Rome’s pagan worldview with its temples, theaters, and idols. Everywhere you looked were competing thrones, rival kingdoms, and clashing values.

And it’s there—surrounded by visual reminders of earthly power—that Jesus gave his disciples a prayer about his kingdom: *Our Father in the heavens, holy be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*



² Carmine Gallo, *Talk Like Ted* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2014), 213.



Think about that. In a world crowded with rival kingdoms, Jesus points to another kingdom altogether. His prayer becomes a visual compass—redirecting eyes and hearts away from fear, compromise, and retaliation, and re-centering them on God’s reign breaking into the world here and now. We need that same compass today. Our lives are full of competing “kingdoms”: consumerism (always telling us we need more); achievement (whispering we’ll never measure up); partisanship (demanding our ultimate loyalty).

That’s the gift of visual context. When we ask what Jesus and his disciples could see, the Gospels come alive with fresh clarity. Some important questions to ask:

VISUAL

- *What did the place look like?*
- *Are there photos of the ancient ruins or location?*
- *Are there reputable artist illustrations of the story?*
- *What would it have been like to stand there and see what they saw?*

LINGUISTIC

When it comes to the Bible, words aren't just details—they carry worlds of meaning. The Old Testament came to us in Hebrew (with parts in Aramaic), and the New Testament in Greek. One reason we have so many translations is that no single English word can always capture the full depth of the original languages.

But sometimes the key insight isn't about the meaning of one word—it's about the grammar. For instance, when Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he didn't say "My Father" or "Give me this day my daily bread." He said:

Our Father. Give us. Forgive us. Deliver us.

The prayer is intentionally plural. Faith isn't a solo project—it's a communal way of life. Yet we're so conditioned by individualism and self-reliance that the communal nature of this prayer barely registers. As Lois Tverberg notes, "English speakers have a habit of reading every 'you' in the Bible as if it's addressed to 'me all by myself' rather than 'me within God's larger community.'" ³

Jesus anchors us in the plural because prayer isn't just about me and God—it's about us, together. His prayer re-centers us in community, reminding us that our story is intimately linked to the stories of others.

And that's not the only plural surprise in the Lord's Prayer. When Jesus said *Our Father in heaven* (the traditional rendering) the word "heaven" is also plural. A more literal reading would be: *Our Father in the heavens*. In the ancient Israelite imagination, God reigns above it all in the highest heavens but also descends into the atmosphere around us—so close he fills the very air we breathe. To pray *Our Father in the heavens* is to confess that God is both transcendent over all creation and present with us in every moment.

This is why paying attention to language matters. Subtle details—like whether a word is singular or plural—can unleash profound meaning. As you read the Bible, here are some key questions to help you notice the language of the text:

LINGUISTIC

- What words are significant (Pay attention to key words that get repeated)?
- How do other translations render this word or phrase?
- What does the word mean in its original language?
- Does the word carry any visual imagery or cultural values?
- Where else is it used in this particular book of the Bible?
- Where else is it used in the Bible?

³ Lois Tverberg, *Reading the Bible with Rabbi Jesus: How a Jewish Perspective Can Transform Your Understanding* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2017), 133.

LITERARY

The power of biblical writing lies as much in the arrangement of words as in the words themselves. Understanding the literary context of a passage—things like genre, design, setting, and placement within the larger biblical story—can unlock layers of meaning we might otherwise miss.

Think about how we structure stories in our culture. In Western culture, we often save the best for last—the grand finale of a fireworks show or the dramatic twist in the final scene of a movie. But the biblical authors often highlighted what mattered most by placing it at the center, like the filling in a sandwich.

That’s exactly what Matthew does with the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon is arranged into three broad sections: an introduction (Matthew 5:1–16), a body (Matthew 5:17–7:12), and a conclusion (Matthew 7:13–29). Zoom in on the body, and you’ll see it divides into three parts: righteousness toward Torah (Matthew 5:17–48), righteousness toward God (Matthew 6:1–18), and righteousness in everyday life (Matthew 6:19–7:12). Zoom in again, and the section on righteousness toward God divides into three practices: giving (Matthew 6:1–4), prayer (Matthew 6:5–15), and fasting (Matthew 6:16–18).

And right at the center of the center of the center⁴—what do we find? The Lord’s Prayer. Matthew is doing everything in his literary power to say: “This is it. This is the heart and soul of it all.” And if we zoom in one last time, the very center of the Lord’s Prayer itself gives us the heartbeat of Jesus’ entire mission: *Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*

That’s not just clever design—it’s discipleship by structure. Because if we’re honest, many of us live scattered, tugged in a dozen directions by distraction, anxiety, and responsibility. Matthew’s design calls us back to the center. At the core of life with God is God’s kingdom breaking into the world—not our striving.

That’s the power of literary context. Paying attention to design helps us see what biblical writers wanted us to notice most. As you read, here are some key questions to help you look for those patterns:

LITERARY

- *What type of genre is this?*
- *What is its literary design or structure?*
- *Are there repeated words, phrases, or patterns?*
- *Are there parallel stories—echoes of other passages that shed light on this one?*

⁴ For a detailed account of the structure of the Sermon on the Mount, see Jonathan Pennington’s remarkable book *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), chapter 5.

WHAT NOW?

We've seen how the original context of the Lord's Prayer reveals layers of meaning most of us miss. A prayer we thought we knew by heart turns out to be deeper, bolder, and more beautiful than we imagined. And here's the good news: what's true of the Lord's Prayer is true of the rest of the Bible. Every story, every teaching, every poem gains clarity and richness when read in light of the world it was first spoken into.

So where do we go from here? Start small. Ask new questions. Keep leaning into the six lenses we've explored in these pages. You don't have to master them all overnight—the joy is in the journey. Each time you pause to consider history, geography, culture, visuals, language, or literary design, you're wiping more fog off the window. Slowly but surely, a sharper view will come into focus.

And don't forget—you don't walk this path alone. Scripture was written for communities of faith, and it comes alive when we study and wrestle with it together. Share what you're learning. Ask questions out loud. Let the insights you gain draw you deeper into relationship with God and others.

So go ahead—step into the adventure. Read the Bible with curiosity, with context, and with open eyes. And as you do, may you find the Scriptures to be exactly what they are: the most beautiful, compelling, life-giving story in human history. May you encounter in its pages the God who is still bringing heaven here.

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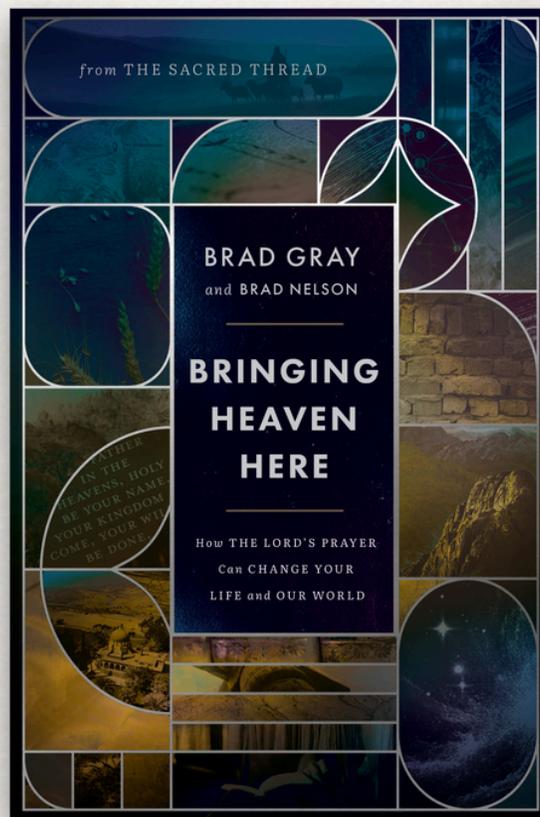
Knowing the importance of seeing things visually and engaging content communally (small groups, class, etc.), we created a free video series called *Lenses of Context* ([CLICK HERE](#)). Each episode unpacks one of the six lenses of context and provides biblical examples that are different than the ones explored in this e-book. Enjoy!

WALKING
THE TEXT



AVAILABLE NOW

Unlock the power of the Lord's Prayer
and live it out every day!



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