Conclusion: A Jewel of Unsurpassed Worth

There is something very satisfying about sorting through dusty books and ancient manuscripts, which transport readers back into the very hearts, lives, and minds of great writers and, by extension, their audiences. Shadowy glimpses of the past pour forth from the vellum to reveal not just complex beliefs, but flesh and blood people who often passionately attempted to live faithful lives of service dedicated to their God. Sadly, the illuminating light was at times accompanied by smoky images that are all too often incomplete, clouded by partial evidence and only wispy visions of the past. The scholar’s task is to attempt to make as much sense of the disparate sources as is feasible. Frequently, the distance of time, place, and cultures makes this task very difficult. As scholars attempt to peer beyond the centuries into the lives and mindsets of both the folks in the pews and the erudite thinkers in their studies, they discover, in this case, a people of honest, heartfelt, and pious convictions that show a remarkable reverence for the words “Our Father.” At times, their passions got the better of them, and vigorous arguments ensued or prejudices developed. When they were at their best, however, early Christians infused the LP into every aspect of their Christian lives and thought in a way that made the prayer a beloved treasure, a pearl of great price.

As early authors sought to understand the LP and its wisdom, they were in some ways seeking to peak into the mind of God, so to speak. To understand more fully what they believed God’s will to be for their communities, a clear, concise overview of the major aspects of the interpretation of the LP as a whole is needed. By way of conclusion, then, it will be helpful to put forth a brief general survey of the theological
interpretations of the LP in the early church in order to complete our historical examination of the LP.

Generally speaking, the two major parts of the LP, that is, its heavenly (petitions 1–3) and earthly (petitions 4–7) sections, demonstrated conclusively for early scholars that the LP covered every conceivable aspect of Christian life and thought, and that it even had much to suggest about the very nature of the cosmos. First and foremost, scholars noted that the prayer was primarily a communal prayer, because of its regular use of words like “our” or “us.”\(^1\) Therefore, even though early Christians were encouraged to pray the LP in their own devotional practices, the prayer was understood primarily to be concerned with the needs of community. This fact alone made the LP especially suitable for communal worship.

The interpretation of the opening address, “Our Father, who is in heaven,” and the heavenly petitions was profoundly affected by the baptismal catechetical use of the LP, as has been suggested in earlier chapters. God, the Father, who was once seen as the formidable Judge\(^2\) or Lord,\(^3\) through the waters of baptism changed the sinful lives of its dripping recipients into a children of God, that is, into the sons or daughters of the most high God.\(^4\) God's name changed in the LP, suggesting that the distant Creator\(^5\) had become an intimate loving parent for these newly adopted baptismal children. Before baptism, they were slaves to sin and children of the devil,\(^6\) but in baptism they were reborn to new life as heirs of God, their Father.\(^7\) This meant then that they were royal children, inheritors of the Kingdom of God,\(^8\) and people who should be bold in prayer.\(^9\) In baptism, God becomes a Father, Christ a brother,\(^10\) the church a mother,\(^11\) and the baptismal font a womb from which the faithful are born to new life.\(^12\)

Despite the fact that the first three petitions revealed a heavenly reality, they were nonetheless troublesome. The sticky issue that appeared in nearly every commentary was the concern about whether praying to make God’s name holy, for God’s kingdom to come, and for God’s will to be done, somehow suggested a lack of these realities; i.e., do the faithful pray these petitions because God’s name is not holy,\(^13\) the kingdom has not or will not come,\(^14\) and God’s will is not done?\(^15\) In each instance, the commentators noted that such logic was foolish. Rather, these petitions revealed that God’s name is already, and always will be, holy;\(^16\) God’s kingdom comes in and of itself;\(^17\) and God’s will is always done.\(^18\) These petitions instead encouraged the faithful to